

What's Your Name Again?
Genesis 32:19-32 7-16-17

Have you ever gone onto the internet to look up the meaning of your name?

For example, I Googled “Vivienne” and found that it means “alive”.

Ian means “gift from God”.

Roger means “famous spear”.

Gary is similar; it means “bold spear”.

And Janette means “God has been gracious”.

For us, this is just a novelty, but in the Ancient Near East names were thought to be descriptors of your character and your destiny.

People believed that to know a person’s name was to have a certain power over them – much like today having a peek at a colleague’s psychological profile might give you an advantage when dealing with them.

You have to bear this in mind when hearing today’s account of Jacob wrestling with the man.

Quick recap of what we’ve covered over the past several weeks as we’ve been walking through the Book of Genesis:

Abraham and Sarah were a barren couple who had followed God’s call to pull-up stakes in Haran and settle in the unknown land of Canaan, where God promised that they would become parents of a great nation.

After years of waiting, they eventually had a son they named Isaac.

They named him Isaac because it means “to laugh”, and Sarah had laughed at God when He’d said that she’d conceive a child at an old age – decades after normal childbearing years.

Isaac had a rather uneventful life, but with his wife Rebekah had twin boys, Esau and Jacob.

Esau was the first born, although Jacob had struggled in their mother’s womb as he tried to be first born because in their culture the first born would inherit the father’s blessing and the lion’s share of the inheritance.

As Esau was delivered, Jacob was holding tight to his heel as if still fighting for the lead position.

It was from this prenatal attempt to abscond with Esau’s birthright that Jacob got his name – which means “supplanter”, one who trips-up or overthrows.

This was a name that followed him throughout his life, warning everyone he encountered that he could be a cheat, charlatan, manipulator, and scoundrel.

Esau was a man's man, and so became Isaac's favorite, while Jacob was soft spoken and inclined to hang-out with his mother, and thus became her favorite.

Jacob proved true to his name by eventually cheating Esau out of both his birthright and his inheritance – which forced him to abandon his ill-gotten wealth and flee for his life from his enraged brother.

On the first night of his lonely escape, he had a dream during which he witnessed God's messengers ascending and descending a stairway to heaven.

That's what we talked about last week.

You'll remember that in his dream he heard the promise from God to be with him always and everywhere.

Genesis 28:15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Jacob named this place Bethel, meaning "house of God", a place that would later play a divisive role in Israel's history.

Jacob eventually made his way to his ancestral home in Haran in northern Mesopotamia, where he visited his uncle Laban.

If you trace the journeys of Abraham from Haran into Canaan, and Jacob back to Haran, you'll see that they passed through cities that are very much in the news today such as Aleppo and Damascus.

It turns out that Laban was as much of a scoundrel as Jacob.

What happens is that Jacob falls in love with Laban's youngest daughter, Rachel.

Laban grants permission for Jacob to marry her, but since he is now penniless he'll have to earn her hand by serving as a farm hand for seven years.

Jacob agrees, works for seven years, but at the conclusion of his much-anticipated wedding ceremony he lifts his bride's veil to discover that Laban had switched daughters on him.

Jacob was now married to the older daughter, Leah.

Jacob then had to work for an additional seven years to be granted Rachel's hand, but along the way he manages to accumulate his own wealth of livestock.

After nearly two decades, Jacob is ready to take his family and return home and face his brother – uncertain of how he will be greeted.

However, Jacob fears that if his father-in-law gets wind of his plan, he will prevent him from leaving with his wealth and with Laban's daughters and grandchildren.

Jacob even fears that Laban might kill him.

So, they wait for an opportune moment when Laban is off shearing his sheep and then make a run for it, but not before Rachel steals her father's household gods.

She probably stole the gods because she believed that they would provide safety during their journey.

After three days, Laban discovers what's happened, gives chase and intercepts them.

There's some give and take, but ultimately they depart on good terms – while Rachel conceals and denies taking her father's household gods.

So, now this large caravan of sheep, goats, donkeys, camels, cattle, servants and family head south toward Edom – in the southern-most part of Canaan – where Esau had settled.

Jacob didn't know what fate might await him, so he sent messengers ahead to tell Esau that he was coming.

When the messengers return, they say that Esau and an army of four hundred men are heading north to meet him, sending Jacob into a cold sweat.

So, Jacob sends waves of goats, rams, camels, sheep and cattle as of gifts to placate his brother.

He also divides his herds, servants and family into two groups so that if one were attacked, at least the other would survive.

Jacob plans for them to approach Esau in reverse order of what he values most, reasoning that if there is to be an attack, those at the rear might be spared.

First go the herds of livestock, then Leah with her servants and children, then Rachel with her servants and children.

The evening before the meeting, he sends them ahead over the river Jabbok and waits behind for the night.

This is just the situation that had happened years before during the night he'd had his dream of the stairway to Heaven: Jacob again is alone, vulnerable, and afraid.

Jacob offers a type **of** prayer we see elsewhere in the Old Testament:

He confesses his situation, he reminds God of His promises, and based on those promises he petitions for help.

Genesis 32: 11-12 *“Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said,*

‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’”

Sitting in the barren, darkening landscape, Jacob prays and reflects on his life as a trickster and a fraud, and wonders if he will live through tomorrow when a stranger suddenly attacks him.

A fight ensues – not a rock throwing, fist flying fight, but a close-up, flesh on flesh wrestling match.

Jacob is strong, but not strong enough to throw-off his assailant.

And his assailant isn’t strong enough to stomp Jacob into submission, either.

But they both persist through an exhausting night.

Of course, we realize that this is God – and we may marvel at God’s commitment to stay in the struggle, closely engaged with Jacob throughout the night.

To this point, Jacob has not seen the face of his opponent, but as the sun begins to rise the attacker strikes Jacob near his hip, throwing it out of joint.

Despite the pain, Jacob holds tight, realizing that this is no ordinary man.

Now he is aware that this is God, but because no one can see the face of God and live, Jacob is risking death by hanging on to his hope for a blessing.

Genesis 28:26 *Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak. But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”*

Instead of a blessing, the man asks (vs. 27) *“What is your name?”*

Recalling what we know about the power of names in the Ancient Near East, we realize that this is God asking Jacob to confess.

To say, “I am Jacob” is to confess to his shoddy character and ill-gotten gains.

But for Jacob to come clean is just short of death, for when a con-man and a phony is revealed, what does he have left?

At long last, years after twice cheating his brother out of his rights and wealth, it seems that Jacob is about to get the punishment that he deserves.

Karma’s a bitch, as they say.

But instead of punishment, God gives Jacob a new name and thus a new identity.

Genesis 32:28 *Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”*

God again affirms His promise to be with Jacob – now Israel – and to build a great nation through him.

As we've seen a couple of times now in these opening chapters of the Bible, often when we expect a god of wrath, we find a God of blessing.

By the way, notice that when Jacob asks for the name of the man – of God – he is not given an answer.

God will engage us, struggle with us, promise us ... but God will not give us power over him.

Whenever we struggle with God we are never the same.

We may be wounded, but we are blessed.

We can't help but compare Jacob's wrestling with God with Abraham's testing with the possible sacrifice of Isaac.

Whereas Abraham's was a test of faith, Jacob's was a test of resilience - "let's see what this guy's made of."

These tests were divinely-initiated exercises in human becoming, shaping and sharpening people in preparation for challenges they will face.

Jacob, now Israel, had proven himself as he limped away toward what may be a life and death struggle with Esau, but with a renewed blessing, promise and confidence that God is with him no matter how tough the going gets.

The next day he saw Esau with his four hundred men approach.

Jacob went forward and bowed seven times as a show of submission.

Genesis 33:4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

The two brothers reconciled but went their separate ways, Esau in the south and Jacob eventually establishing himself in the central part of Canaan.

Jacob fathered at least two daughters, and twelve sons – the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The image of the one who struggles with God has sustained the Hebrew people through generations of anti-Semitism, oppression, pogroms, and holocausts.

It has been an affirmation that they can persevere and eventually be blessed through any struggle.

Names have power.

Some of us were given names that have not served us well.

Weakling.

Loser.

Fatso.

Divorced.

Boring.

Irresponsible.

Weirdo.

Coward.

Over the hill.

Phony.

Unlovable.

Unlikeable.

Unworthy.

Abused.

Abuser.

Just a drunk.

And some of us have allowed those names to call the shots for years.

I wonder what names you've carried around, names that have subtly directed your life.

Although we call it the Sacrament of Baptism, some traditions use the term Christening.

They use that term to emphasize that when as we rise from the waters of baptism we are a new person who takes on the identity of Christ.

We are Christ-likened.

Romans 8:16-17a God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance!

We are so accustomed to the names that have been hung on us that it is difficult to hear, let alone believe, that God see us as precious members of His family – but it's the truth.

Reclaiming the name Beloved Child of God is healing and empowering.

And then in a way that parallels what Jacob learned from his struggle with God, we learn:

Romans 8:17b We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!

When we hold on, we discover that God sticks with us through thick and thin.

And just one more thing.

After his encounter with God, Jacob reconciled with his brother, established his home back in Canaan where his family had been called.

He raised twelve sons and two daughters, but he continued to con and manipulate, and as we'll see next week, he was far from a perfect father.

God doesn't just use perfect people. There are none.

God doesn't just love perfect people. There are none.

While you are a beloved child of God, you're still a human with all your blemishes and hang-ups.

And God loves you anyway.