

***Jacob becomes Israel***  
***Genesis 32:3-32***  
***January 20, 2019***

Names are really important in the biblical story. They capture the character of the person. My name in Scotland means friend of God. I don't imagine my parents chose that name for that reason. It's a popular name in Scotland. But since I became a friend of God through my experience of God in my life I like to think that I sort of fulfilled the meaning of my name.

Many of us get names we cringe to hear. As a youngster my Christian name was rarely used. Only my family called me Ian. Rarely did my friends in public or high school call me by my Christian name. I had a nickname, and where it came from I don't remember. But it was a name that I hated. I was always called "feaser". That nickname stuck with me well into my teens. To this day the memory of that name makes me cringe. Names are so important and precious. They can also hurt and cripple us in life. My nickname embarrassed me.

Jacob's name means usurper, grasper, and supplanter. From the time he came from his mother's womb grasping the heel of his older brother Esau, Jacob lived up to the meaning of his name. He was the smaller, weaker of the two brothers and learned how to live by his wits rather than his strength. Jacob in life devotes his energy and wit to deceiving others to get what he wanted. He did so by deceiving first his brother and then his aging father Isaac. In the second chapter of his life he deceived his uncle Laban and made off with great wealth in wives, children and herds of livestock.

But after twenty years with his uncle Laban he is going back home to the land of Canaan and that raises all kinds of fears for Jacob. His brother Esau is now fresh on his mind. So when he hears that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men Jacob is terrified. Jacob had reason to fear as Esau had vowed to kill him. Jacob prays:  
*(slide 1) 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.*

Prayer may not be enough. True to character Jacob seeks to resolve the situation by himself using his wits. Will good old Esau let bygones be bygones? Or will he exact revenge? Jacob sends messengers ahead to soften Esau up. First he divides his people and herds into two companies with the hope that should Esau destroy the one the other can escape. Second, he sends three droves of animals ahead as gifts to Esau with the hope that by the time he meets the third group his heart will be well disposed toward Jacob. Then Jacob sent his wives, children and remaining flocks over the Jabbok River and he was left alone. All alone in the dark Jacob tries to sleep. (slide 2)

And then it happens. Frederick Buechner describes the scene this way: ***Out of the deep of the night a stranger leaps. He hurls himself at Jacob, and they fall to the ground, their bodies lashing through the darkness...All the night through they struggle in silence until just before morning when it looks as though a miracle might happen.*** (slide 3)

As morning approaches the man asks Jacob his name. As it turns out this is the Lord wrestling with Jacob and when Jacob is pinned beneath this strong Lord he is asked to tell his name. Is God asking Jacob to recognize his life of deception and grasping? Is God asking for a confession? Can Jacob finally come clean about what he has done to other people and especially his father and brother, not to mention his uncle? Perhaps now, we muse, Jacob is getting what he deserves. But wait this is not what happens. This is a struggle he will not win, at least not outright. Jacob demands to know the stranger's name. But he will not give it. But he gives Jacob a new name. No longer will he be called "Jacob" meaning heel/trickster/ over-reacher/ supplanter. (slide 4)

*Now he will be called Israel meaning "God rules or God preserves, or God protects".* Jacob is transformed forever by this struggle with God.

Jacob sits up as the morning light hits him and says to himself: *I will call this place Peniel, because I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved.*

Jacob has a new name and a new character. ***Israel is not formed by success***, says Walter Brueggemann, ***or by shrewdness or land, but by an assault from God***. This is a demanding God, this God of Israel and of Jesus of Nazareth. This God is not a benevolent, kind old man as depicted in the wizard of Oz.

When he finally meets Esau Jacob bows to the ground and says to him: *truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God*. Jacob will become the father of the great nation promised to Abraham. All twelve tribes will come from his children.

In baptism we too receive a new name. Many of us have got used to calling Baptist a ***christening***. We bring them to the font and give them their Christian name. And while I still prefer that we refer to the sacrament as Baptism, the popular term has its value. For it affirms that we belong to Christ. We are Christ-ened! We are baptized into the waters and emerge with a new relationship and name. We belong to Christ and are called to be like him. Like Jacob we are given a new name. We are blessed and named in Christ. And anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, Paul teaches. Live out your new name, is the message of baptism. Jacob did, and we are called to do so also.

We all bring our names with us to church. Whatever that name means to you, your family and friends, it is not your only name. In baptism we received a new identity, just like Jacob did that night he was blessed by God. He was now the God-wrestler, and no longer the deceiver, grasper, cheat and scoundrel. His name would live on through the centuries and would identify the nation of Israel. He would be the father of the twelve tribes. From now on he would walk with a limp, a symbol of his inner change.

I ask you today to confess your new names. Who are you? What is your name? Does it reflect your character? These old names sometimes have great power over us and make us feel weak and vulnerable. But God reminds us in this story of Jacob that we too have new names in baptism. You belong to Christ is what these new names signify. You are my child, Joan, William, Ronald, Geoffrey, Ian, Jane, Jennifer, Irene, or whatever your name might be. We leave here today with our new names in Christ. Go in confidence that Christ is with you.

This is a God, this God of the bible and of Israel's experience, of passion and engagement. God is not to be thought of as warm and fuzzy and comfortable with the status quo. Rather God is depicted as a God of love, passion and fire.

(slide 5) The description of Jacob limping into the morning sunrise has always impressed me as a powerful image of the change God's presence makes on our lives. It is a powerful image. He has a new name, but he also is crippled. The mysterious stranger has wounded him in the hip. It is a wound that will never be healed. His struggle with God has been rewarded, but it has also come with defeat. It is a magnificent defeat to be sure. The evidence of his victory forever etched in his body

None of this ought to surprise us. The history of the nation Israel and of Jesus is filled with the same pathos and struggle with God. If we wanted a religion of power and control we should all become members of Scientology I suppose. But the faith story expressed in the bible, stories like Jacob, is rather one of crippling, repentance, crucifixion and defeat. Before resurrection comes a cross. Before the defeat of the evil ones comes struggle, pain and apparent loss and defeat. But beyond the river Jabbok, beyond the cross, is a new beginning for humanity. It is a life blessed by God's presence and promise to Jacob, "I will be with you and keep you wherever you go".

The Christian life is often a struggle. Prayer, as one expression of that new life, usually doesn't come naturally to us. But in the struggle we also get a new name from the one who emerged triumphant after death, Jesus Christ. To be his follower is to be named by him. This is what Baptism is all about. It is the sign of our new identity.

**Amen**