

Reading from the Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 32:22-31

It's Your Name

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Why are you called the name you have been given? What kind of thought went into naming you? Maybe your name is a family name that has been passed down from generation to generation. Maybe you were given your name because it was popular when you were born. If you were born in the 1960s in California there's a good chance you know someone named Moonbeam.

There's even an organization that will help you choose the right baby name for your newborn. They proclaim: "It is the power behind the meaning of baby names that is significant. The name you give your baby creates its likes and dislikes, ambitions, capabilities, destiny, and degree of success." And ... for a mere \$215, they will help you find that perfect baby name . . ." Or so they say.

Biblical characters are often given names that are associated with their individual characteristics. I love the way the ancient Hebrew people named their children. A name had significance. It had a meaning that was particularly associated with the person. As we've followed the escapades of Jacob over the past few weeks, we've been introduced to quite a cast of family names: the great patriarch Abraham ... rightly named the "father of many" ... Isaac is named after his elderly mother's reaction to the news that she would bear a child ... his name means "he laughs" ... Isaac's wife Rebecca's name means "to connect or join" ... Jacob's twin brother Esau's name means "hairy" ... for he was covered in red hair when he was born ... and Jacob ... well that name means "holder of the heel" because when he was born he held tightly to Esau's heel.

Names ... they are important. They still are. But only one name you were given is truly important. Do you know what it is? Our story picks up as Jacob and his family want to go home ... but there's still a problem ... years before Jacob swindled his brother out of his inheritance ... and when Jacob sends servants to tell Esau that he wants to come home ... the servants come back with some bleak news for Jacob ... his brother is on the way to meet him with 400 men.

So Jacob sends his family ahead of him with offerings of cattle and oxen and goats for his brother to try and appease him ... while he stays behind ... alone ... and the night is coming. Listen with me now to the continuation of the saga of Jacob ... from Genesis, chapter 32, verses 22-31.

I will be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Out of respect for the Word of the Lord, those able, please stand for our reading.

32:22 The same night (JACOB) got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

32:23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

32:24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

32:25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

32:26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

32:27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

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."

32:29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

32:30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

32:31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

This is the word of our Lord. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Jacob's drifting in and out of a pitiful sleep ... his mind struggling with what lies ahead of him ... the fear of meeting his brother after all these years. He's filled with anxiety ... his past is catching up with him.

Walter Brueggemann writes that "During the day, Jacob is able to manage and take the initiative. But at night, as for all of us, Jacob turns out to be vulnerable, and things rush powerfully beyond his control. His night is peopled by those uninvited and unwelcomed in his life. But they are the

very ones with whom he has to come to terms, if he is to go home peaceably." (THE STRUGGLE TOWARD RECONCILIATION, by Walter Brueggemann)

Trouble seems to find us at night. It did for Jacob. It was very sudden. There was no warning. Jacob didn't know who grabbed him. One moment he's alone ... the next he's locked in desperate combat with a stranger ... and on and on they go at it ... fighting ... struggling ... wrestling through the night.

For some reason we're so much more vulnerable in the darkness of night ... and there ... in that darkness ... sometimes our minds just go wild ... we imagine all kinds of things that might happen to us ... all kinds of possibilities ... you might spend your entire day trying to figure out how you are going to deal with some big issue in your life ... but when you go to bed that night, your great plan unravels in your head ... or maybe there's been some problem or situation you tucked away in the deep recesses of your mind ... you never dealt with it ... and you haven't thought about it in many years ... and out of the blue ... out it comes ... surprising you with its memory. Are you able to name it? After all ... it's your name.

It can be terrifying as your mind begins to wrestle with a past that seems to have caught up with you. Has that ever happened to you? Suddenly ... like someone has jumped on you ... you wake up in the middle of the night and fear and anxiety seem to overwhelm you ... and you wrestle with something throughout the night.

Your sleep is gone ... as you come face to face with your past ... with your problems ... with your troubles ... even your sins ...

Your child ... or maybe your spouse ... continues to struggle with drugs or alcoholism. You've always put on a good front ... keeping that deep dark family secret hidden from others ... making up all kinds of excuses ... telling little white lies ... but now the problem is beginning to affect you ... it's eating a hole in you ... you want to do something about it ... but you're afraid or you just don't think there's anything you can do.

So like you've always done ... you keep enabling the destructive behavior ... at a deep cost to your own peace of mind. And through the night you wrestle with it ... and the pain is unbearable ... and you can't seem to change it. Are you able to name it? After all ... it's your name.

Or maybe years ago ... your pride got the best of you ... and you deeply hurt someone with words ... maybe you spread a nasty rumor just to get even with someone ... maybe you took advantage of someone to get ahead in your work ... maybe your anger got the best of you and that once special relationship ... be it with a wife or husband or child or relative or close friend ... ended suddenly. Ever since ... you've tried to justify your actions or your words ... but somewhere deep

down, you know the truth ... and you wrestle with the pain you've created for others and yourself ... but it's just too hard to reconcile ... to seek forgiveness. You've given yourself a name ... and you can't seem to change it. Are you able to name it? After all ... it's your name.

We all carry baggage from our past ... some of us carry terrible loads caused by abuse that goes all the way back to our childhood. Sometimes our past catches up with us and it creates great emotional resentment within us ... even horrible anger or deep depression. And those emotions become a part of us ... they become a part of our personalities ... and they infect each and every one of our relationships ... for the good and for the bad. Are you able to name it? After all ... it's your name.

We all deal with all kinds of regrets and fears and setbacks and disappointments and failures throughout our lives. Life turns out differently than the way we thought we had it planned. It's just not the way things were supposed to work out ... this is not how I dreamed my life would be ... it's not fair ... and you spend your days struggling with the envy and the greed and the bitterness ... and you can't let go of it. And then we end up spending our lives blaming others for our unhappiness and our pain. Are you able to name it? After all ... it's your name.

Jacob's has the name he was given at birth ... the holder of the heel. But God has something else in mind for him. You see ... Jacob prays to God with all of his heart that everything between he and his brother will turn out OK ... he begs for God's mercy and help. But when you make that kind of prayer ... you never know how God might answer you. Because there ... all alone on the bank of a river ... Jacob's prayer is answered ... and he comes face to face with all of his past sins and troubles ... as he wrestles with non-other than God almighty.

When you wrestle with your past in the night ... when you wrestle with God ... most of the time you just want to give up ... because it hurts too much to face your past ... and you don't want to face what God might be asking you to do if things are to change.

Jacob has been running away for a long time ... but this time Jacob holds on ... he holds on for dear life ... he wants his life to change ... he prays that something this time will be different ... and so ... for the first time ... he faces his past. This time he is able to name it ... because it is his name.

Sometimes God is waiting for you in the darkness ... waiting for those moments when you least expect it and when you are most vulnerable like Jacob. That's when God enters your life and wrestles with you through the dark of the night ... not to destroy you or beat you down ... but to engage you in what is sometimes a painful journey of self-discovery ... to open your heart ... to open your eyes to the denial you have been living in order that you can see a new direction ... a new course ... a new way of living.

And then ... when you can put a name on that ugly past ... when you can open your heart to God ... then God is ready to take that name away and give you a new name. It's all about accepting the truth about your life ... it's all about confessing our sins to the God who does not judge us but loves us ... it's all about asking for God's forgiveness ... or to be willing to give forgiveness to someone else ... or to just ask God to give you the strength to really change how you are dealing with someone else's dysfunctional or addictive behavior ... and then to turn it over to the Lord.

Because when you do ... you will receive something else far more wonderful from our Savior ... you will, like Jacob ... be given a new name and a blessing to go with it.

There's no doubt about it. Sometimes it's hard to face the truth within ourselves. Sometimes it just hurts too much to think about those things ... those things we've managed to push down so deeply into our minds ... that we hope have disappeared.

But the past always seems to bubble up when we least expect it. It's always there. It just won't go away ... affecting our lives and our relationships with the people we love. But then ... something happens ... and God calls us to turn around and face it ... and like Jacob, we are told to go home again ... to reconcile something in our lives.

And even though all kinds of fears and pain might be standing in our way, we don't have to be afraid to face them. We just need to remember ... as Jacob learned ... that God isn't struggling against us ... but with us ... and for us. We still face the consequences of sin ... most of us have a limp of some kind ... physical, emotional ... but just like Jacob, we fulfill the calling God has placed on our lives.

Oh yes ... that new name I told you about ... the truth is ... you've always had it ... it was given to you by God long before you knew anything about it ... it was even spoken to you at the waters of your baptism ... that name is ... "Child of God."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.