

A New Name
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Genesis 32:22-32

It's such a sensational story-with mystery mixed in as well. Particularly when it comes to the wrestler who jumps Jacob in the middle of the night. Who is this man, referred to in v24, that wrestles with Jacob until daybreak? The Hebrew word used in our text is "ish" which literally means a man. But Jacob, in the morning, declares that he was wrestling with God, while many in the Jewish tradition lean toward it being an angel.

Well-here's the thing. Though there's a participant in this story who's hard to figure out, the power in this story comes from the players we know well. Jacob and God-who most certainly had his hand in it all.

Let me ask: when you think of Jacob, what's the first word that comes to mind? For me-it's grabber. You might know that's what Jacob's name means. When Rebekah gave birth to Esau and Jacob-Esau came first, followed by Jacob-who was born grabbing onto Esau's heel. Thus the name Jacob. What's interesting about that is that Jacob ends up living up to that name. Over and over again.

Being younger, smaller, weaker and less hairy than his brother Esau-plagued Jacob's early life. The fact that even his dad preferred Esau didn't help. And so as you may remember, Jacob eventually grabs his hungry brother's birthright and then with the wool pulled over his own arms snatched Esau's blessing from their father, too. Soon after Jacob cowardly flees his distraught brother, escaping to his equally deceitful uncle Laban, and eventually flees from there as well. In fact, Jacob is still in-route from Laban's home when he receives word that his brother Esau is coming to meet him with an army of four hundred men. So Jacob, in a panic, stuck between a rock and hard place, hides away half his wealth, and then with what is left, sends three caravans of gifts ahead to Esau, intending to bribe his way back into his brother's good graces.

We enter Jacob's story as night is falling and Jacob's anxiety is rising. He's just sent the rest of his family and servants across the river, maybe hoping that even if Esau refuses his offerings, he may at least take pity on Jacob at the sight of his vulnerable wives and children.

Meanwhile, back at camp, our text says, "Jacob was left alone." Left alone. At night. In the dark. To think. To worry. To remember. To imagine scenarios. To rehearse regrets. To combat shame. To scheme some more. To worry some more. I know how this goes. Maybe you do too. Nights can be a battle ground in our minds sometime.

Nights are when the names you've called yourself or that others have called you or that you imagine they've called you surface and get big in your mind. When the only light in your room is coming from the numbers that are illuminated and moving ever so slowly on your bedside clock-our minds sometimes rehearse those names. Maybe I am a bad mother. Maybe I was an absent father. Maybe I am insecure, selfish, greedy, manipulative. Maybe it's true that I'm a loser when it comes to life or faith or success. Maybe I am a hopeless cause and will never measure up. Maybe that sin that plagues me is unforgivable. Maybe those mistakes I made are irredeemable. Maybe I'm irredeemable. The names we call ourselves are really important and powerful. Our story confirms that. Let's go back.

So, after Jacob gets jumped by the assailant and they wrestled all night, as daylight approaches and Jacob seems on the verge of winning, his opponent wrenches his hip (perhaps

dislocates it) and demands that Jacob release him. “Bless me, first,” Jacob cries, sensing that his wrestling companion is no ordinary creature and may very likely be the Lord. To which his visitor responds, “Tell me your name.” “Tell me who you are.”

Well-this is a really important demand in our story. Because in the Near-Eastern culture a name does so much more than simply identify someone. Often times names indicate one’s essential character and even sometimes one’s destiny. And so when the Lord pins Jacob down and demands to know his name, demands that Jacob say his name out loud, he is demanding no less than that Jacob confess-that Jacob confess and finally come clean about all his grabbing, all his deceiving, all his conniving. You know, you could look at this moment a little like judgment day for Jacob. God has caught up with him. Maybe at long last Jacob is going to be put in his place once and for all and get what he deserves. Except that’s not what happens. In fact, instead of doling out punishment, the Lord gives Jacob a new name.

Before we think about that new name I want to say that I think this story is a gift to us in the season of Lent. Because that is exactly what we are called to do in this season. To take inventory. To take an honest look. To wrestle with what our lives have been and to think hard about the path they’re on now. To confess. To come clean about the ways we have missed the mark. To admit that we have not lived like we fully trust in God’s care and forgiveness and mercy.

So, what about this new name Jacob gets? Well, Jacob will now be called Israel-the one who has wrestled with God and man and has prevailed. And Jacob will go on from there to be reconciled to his brother Esau, and beyond that, will parent a nation that still today proudly bears his name.

So is it true that Jacob the grabber actually did prevail? Well, yes, in the sense that Jacob finally learned how to grab at the right thing. In confessing his own sinful brokenness, Jacob was compelled to cling to God. And that, friends, is where the blessing comes in. The blessing of life comes not from what you are holding, but whom you are holding. Even more to the point-the blessings of life come from the One who is holding you.

Who are you really? What is your name? This morning, we stood at the baptismal font and declared that little James Xavier belongs to God. And though folks in his life will likely call him James, or shorten it in some way, God has given to him another name. And it’s your name too. And it’s my name. Even though none of us, James or me or you deserve or have earned this name. Our new name defines our deepest identity and it’s a gift of God. Your new name and my new name and James’ new name is: Beloved of God, which means we are dearly, unconditionally, relentlessly loved by our Maker. Our name is Beloved of God. Or if we want to shorten it—simply Beloved.

You know, it does seem Jacob ended up with a greater understanding of that amazing truth at the end of our story, but he also ended up with something else. A limp. Jacob did not get out of his wrestling match with God without a wound. And neither do we. I don’t know all of your wounds, and can’t say what level of involvement God has or has not had in them. But I do know, from having walked a bit with people through difficulty-that seeing God and God’s grace more clearly comes sometimes from carrying wounds.

As a pastoral staff, we have spent time in the past reading and discussing books on church leadership. The one with perhaps the most interesting name and concept is called *Leading with a Limp*, by Dan Allendar. In it, Allendar suggests that what God calls all of us to (not just leaders) is something that goes against the wisdom of this world-and that is being honest with ourselves and others about our brokenness. He proposes that God calls us all to grace, not

success. He quotes the Apostle Paul to whom the church turns again and again as one of the most significant leaders God has given us, who says this in his letter to Timothy: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.”

Allender tells a story in the book about his daughter, Amanda. He writes “Amanda had an open bottle of alcohol in her car at a school event. She was arrested, and it began a difficult season for us all. Amanda’s home incarceration lasted 90 days. She could go to school but had to come straight home—no friends, no music, no television, no phone calls. She could do homework, read, and spend time with her mother and father.” Allender says, “It was torture.” During that time Allender’s daughter read an article in a local newspaper about a group going to Siberia to work with orphans. She was allowed to go to some of the information and planning meetings. After earning enough money to pay her way, Amanda was permitted to go on the trip after her incarceration and that journey subsequently shaped Amanda’s life going forward in profound ways.

Well, as it turned out Amanda was one of the first people to read the manuscript of Allender’s book which at the time did not tell Amanda’s story. It was Amanda herself who after reading his draft asked her dad why he hadn’t included the story of her arrest. She said to him, “It’s a painful story for me, yet I know God is written all over it.”

All of us carry wounds. All of us walk with a limp, even when it’s not visible. But these are reminders that though we are weak, the grace and mercy of God are strong. We prevail in this life not because of our cunning, but because of our confession. Our confession of faith in the God who calls us Beloved and makes us new people. And as we live our lives, we will see most clearly what kind of God we have when we look at the cross, when we look to the One who was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Friends, it’s not an easy thing to wrestle with God. I suspect you know that. What I pray you will remember is to make sure God is the one to which you are clinging. And don’t forget the blessing. You’ll find it in God’s deep, deep ocean of grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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