

Genesis 32:22-31

**A New Name©
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Today, we end the saga of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith we have in the God of the covenant. Of course, the lineage goes on and on but for now, we will have to break.

We have heard about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Esau, Jacob and Rachel and Leah. What we have seen so far, is that God calls people who are very human, very imperfect and God blesses and uses them for his purpose – a purpose that has proven to be good throughout the ages.

Because we missed last Sunday, I want to put Jacob's saga into different acts, as if in a play, just to freshen our memories.

Act 1 – Jacob is born, the second of twins. His brother Esau is big, hairy, wild and wooly and is his father, Isaac's, favorite. He, by being the first born, is the one who should get the birthright, the inheritance and his father's blessing for a life of prosperity and good.

Jacob (which means supplanter, or cheat) is born holding on to the heels of his brother. He is slim and smooth skinned and he is his mother, Rebekah's favorite.

Jacob lives up to his name by cheating his brother out of both his inheritance and his father's blessing, the first, by bribing Esau when he was in a weak moment of extreme hunger; and the second, by disguising himself as his hairy brother to trick his blind, dying father into giving him the blessing, believing Jacob was Esau.

Act 2: Jacob flees for his life to the home country of Haran and takes refuge with his uncle Laban. He falls in love with Rachel but is deceived by his equally deceptive uncle and ends up marrying Rachel's sister, Leah, before finally getting to marry the love of his life, Rachel.

Leah has many children, while Rachel is barren until later when she conceives and has a son – Joseph.

Act 3: 20 years later, Jacob takes his 12 sons and 2 wives, his maids, servants and livestock and heads back to the land of Canaan, the land of his birth, the land where his brother Esau lives. He is terrified of his brother's wrath but he believes it is time to go home and face the music. He believes God is calling him home.

Act 4: We are now in act 4. Jacob and his large family, his great wealth of livestock and his servants are all at the Jabbok River. Jacob sends someone ahead to tell Esau he is coming and has wealth and gifts to give. He is coming in peace and hopes to make amends. The report comes back that Esau is headed his way – with an army of 400 men on horses.

So, Jacob divides his company all up and sends everyone in his traveling party across the river in different groups. He sends servants and livestock, then Leah and her children and finally, then what is most precious to him – Rachel and their son, Joseph.

And Jacob stays behind at the river to wait, and to think; to hope that he is forgiven and all will go well.

But he barely hears last of the clatter and noise of his departing family before someone – “A man” – begins wrestling with him. It’s interesting that the Hebrew word for wrestle (*ye’hbek*), and the name Jacob (*y’acob*) in Hebrew both sound very much alike.

They wrestle all night and it isn’t until daybreak that the man tells Jacob, who held on and fought a good fight, to let him go. One commentary I read said that in folk tales, as well as biblical stories, the moment of dawn is an important one; the time between night and day is the perfect point to signal an epic conflict and transforming event. This was one of those times.

Jacob won’t let go and the man finally pulls Jacob’s hip out of the socket. Still Jacob held on and said he wanted a blessing from him before he let him go. We think back on Jacob’s deceiving his father to get the blessing that was meant for his brother. Now, he is fighting for his life, holding on with strong perseverance, determined to get an authentic blessing from this man, whom we discover is God himself.

The Lord asked Jacob his name and Jacob tells him. Jacob. (*y’acob*) Supplanter. Cheater. Deceiver. Fighter.

Now, here is the thing. In Jacob’s day, a name wasn’t just a name. It described your character. It sort of prescribed who you were. To be named a name was almost a prophecy of who you would be. Jacob had certainly lived up to his name.

When this man (who actually turns out to be the Lord) asks Jacob his name, it is almost as if he is asking for Jacob to confess – who he is; all he is; all he has ever been and all he has done.

“I am Jacob. The Supplanter. The trickster. The thief and deceiver. “
And God, instead of saying “What? I didn’t realize how horrible you are!” The Lord God said, “From now on, your name will be Israel, for you have wrestled with God and humans and have prevailed.”

See, God did what God does - transformed a man from being a cheat and liar and a deceiver to being the strong, persevering man who wrestled with God and lived to tell about it, in spite of his permanent limp. God can use this man to be the father of many nations. And he does.

Jacob belongs to God. The journey Jacob was on was a journey of transformation all along. His life, his name, his actions, his name change – all were part of his becoming who he would be as God’s own.

Act 5: Jacob meets Esau and finds forgiveness, grace, love and hospitality. All is well that ends well.

So, think about the names you have been called. What does your name mean? We don't put the character of a person in the meaning of his or her name anymore, do we? We don't name someone a name that literally means Cheater or Deceiver and then expect that is what they will do and be all of their lives. But names do have meaning. Who are you named after? What does your name mean?

My name – Sharlyn – was the name of one of my dad's old girlfriends. I've never been thrilled with this name. I was too shy, growing up, to correct any adults who said it wrong – who was almost everyone. So, I just answered to Sharleen, Charley, Sharon, Charlotte, Shar, Charmin and, the most popular of all – Sharilyn. I've actually had people correct me when I said my name was Sharlyn. "Oh Sharilyn! I'm so glad you called," they say.

I wish for my name to be Grace, after my grandmother Grace. Now that would have meant something. Besides, I've been given an awful lot of grace over the years. It's an appropriate name for me.

But I've also had other names. Some were good. I've been called Sissy, Mother Sister, Sharly Anne. And my official title – The Reverend Dr. Sharlyn Gates. Pastor Sharlyn.

The more hurtful names were nicknames – fat names that I won't put in your heads. But those names definitely have influenced my thinking about who I am and how I look to the world. They are the names I've wrestled with overcoming all my life.

So, think about your names: What name were you given at birth? What is the name you are called? Do you have a nickname? Is it one that is full of love and admiration or one that has been hurtful?

Are you teacher? Doctor? Lawyer? Carpenter? Farmer?

Maybe you have been called one of these names: unfaithful, mean, condescending, liar, cheat, controlling, back stabber, loser, unworthy, irresponsible? Discouraged or burnt-out? Divorced, deserted, or widowed? Coward or bully? Unloved or unloving? Disappointed or disappointing? Abused or abuser? Ugly or abnormal?

Wouldn't it be nice if God would pin us down and give us a new name, like He did with Jacob? Well, the good news is that, as baptized Christians, we have been given a new name. We are baptized into the body of Christ – as Christians – little Christs. In the waters of baptism, we are grafted into the body of Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit and made to be his children, forgiven and set free from all those old, hurtful names and situations. In Christ we are part of the family of God, named after the one whom we are heirs with. Christ our Lord.

Paul writes in Romans 8:14-17 ¹⁴*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.*

¹⁵*For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit*

of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ...

We are called Christians. Sons and daughters of the Living God – the Father of Jesus, our Lord. Our Father – by His own choosing.

David Lose writes in his commentary on this text: *“For this name, our new name, not only describes us, but in time it also circumscribes all of our living and being as we more fully understand that in Baptism God has promised to regard each and all of us always as God’s own beloved child and to account Christ’s righteousness as our own.”*

You, my friends – and me as well – have been given a name that reflects who we are, and whose we are. The name Christian comes from being little Christs. Reflections of Christ, the one we are co-heirs with.

Like Jacob and all those before and after him, we are still human and we are not perfect. We often wrestle with God and with ourselves. Yet God chose to call us and to claim us as his own, promising to be with us always. We have the name of the one who has transformed us and given us new life.

Let us wrestle and strive to live up to that name. Amen.

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