

What's in a name? Genesis 32:22-32 Reminiscere (Lent 2) 2022

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

“What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” So said the playwright, William Shakespeare. Names matter. We know that. But they don’t ordinarily change who or what they are describing. Whatever word you use to describe it, “chocolate” is chocolate, an apple is an apple, and a rose is a rose. The name may make you think about it differently. Some names are pretty, and some are ugly. Some names are inviting, and some are intimidating. I can call my cat “Cookie”, or I can call him “Mr. Murder Claws”, but it’s the same cat. Much of that response is cultural, but it doesn’t change the thing.

When God names, however, His names mean something. What He calls a thing - or a person - defines that thing, and often determines what it is, and what it is like. He called Adam, “Adam”. His name means both “man” and “soil”. It tells us his origin – and strangely, it speaks of his end, when God says “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for from it you were taken.” The word “ground” is “Adam”. Eve means “Life”, and she was so called because she was the mother of all who have lived or shall live - except Adam. Abraham’s name was changed to reflect the promise of God. His old name meant “Exalted Father.” His new name means “Father of

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the people.” Our Old Testament text for today is another instance of God giving a new name.

The story is well known. Jacob is returning home after twenty years away. He has no idea how his brother Esau is going to feel about him. He has sent gifts on ahead and had divided his possessions and his family into two groups, hoping that even if his brother is hostile, that one group may escape and survive if the other does not. Tonight, the last night before he meets his brother, Jacob takes his family across the Jabbok River, presumably for their safety, and then he goes back across to wait the night alone.

In the night, Jacob is confronted by a man who takes to wrestling with him. Apparently, there was not a lot of conversation, just down in the dust wrestling. He fights all night – a slow version of one of those great action movie battles, I suppose. It appears that Jacob didn't know if he was having a vision or if it was real -- or that somehow, he knew this was no ordinary man. Finally, the dawn is breaking, and the man says, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.” Jacob says. “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” That is why it seems that Jacob knew something that the text doesn't tell us.

Oddities multiply, as the man asks Jacob, “What is your name?” How could you fight all night long and not know the man's name? It

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seems strange to me. But you had to have the name of your adversary to curse him or to bless him, according to traditions older than this account, so Jacob told the man his name. Then the man gives Jacob a new name, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” Now Jacob understands that he has been dealing with God – or one of God’s angels. Then, Jacob asks for His name. Remember, to have the name is to have power over the one whose name you know! That is why the answer is so cryptic – “Why is it that you ask my name?” Jacob could not get what God later gave to Moses.

Now what does this all mean to us? We accept it as historically accurate, but why is reported? Why is it our text today? We ask the Lutheran question, “What does this mean?”

The answer is that we all wrestle with God from time to time. Jacob did it physically. We do it in prayer and in temptation. We don’t do this wrestling to get a new name, but because we’ve got a new name. Our new name is “Christian.” We wear the name of Christ because He bought us for Himself, and called us by name in Baptism, and gave us that new name to wear for ourselves. Revelation 2:17 even speaks of our salvation as getting a new name. It says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him

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who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”

Our new name is the truth of our forgiveness, and that Jesus has taken our sins and we wear His righteousness. That is the meaning of the passage that says, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” In Christ, God sees us as His only begotten Son, pure and precious. We wear Jesus as a new name, not ours by right, but by gift of grace. And with that new name comes all the blessings and riches of heaven and life eternal and of the love of God for us. And since we have the love of God, as the love of a Father, He disciplines us and trains us through trials, and troubles, and sorrows, and temptations.

It is because we wear that new name that we wrestle with God. Without that new name we are unfit and ill-prepared, and we are without what it takes to survive a confrontation with God. But with the new name, God comes not to destroy us, but to train us and strengthen us. So He gives us worries and cares, temptations and sorrows, and all that life throws at us to strengthen us and teach us to call on Him and never give up and to wrestle with God in prayer every day. But He

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doesn't do those things to hurt us, or to frustrate us, but to bless us, just as He did with Jacob.

Jacob defeats the man, only to discover that the man is God. Jacob won because God strengthened him for the battle – something Jacob understood as soon as he knew who it was that he had wrestled. The account of Jacob is intended to teach us that we should never stop, give up, or give in, even when we feel for all the world as though God Himself were against us. The struggles and the temptations and the sorrows are all intended by God as tools to teach and prepare and train us as His children for the life He would have us to live. Only, we need to endure and persevere in our wrestlings. And like Jacob, if we do, God will bless us. We will need to wrestle with God, because He will choose to make us do it. And when we wrestle with Him, in prayer, and in troubles, He will give us the victory at the proper time, and then He will bless us!

This teaching is not some novel interpretation of the Old Testament, but the consistent teaching of the entire Bible. From Romans 5, “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our

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hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Knowing this truth about wrestling with God, we exult in our tribulations, according to Paul. We can exult because our sufferings are no longer simply misfortunes, but evidences to us that God is at work in us and for us.

And so, Jacob’s wrestlings teach us. They teach us that we will also wrestle. They teach us that we can and will prevail, if we remain faithful, because God will be our strength. And they teach us that if we wrestle with endurance, just as Jacob did, God will bless us.

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