

“What’s in a Name?”

Ray Speller, January 9, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church

There’s something powerful about names. Names, as symbols, somehow pack a powerful punch. They bring to mind ideologies, philosophies and even happy memories. For instance, if I were to mention John Boy, Ben and Mary Ellen Walton or Corey Matthews and Shawn Hunter or Spongebob and Patrick or maybe Whitley and Keenu, some of you would immediately have happy memories of watching your favorite television show from back in the day. In just a few simple letters names can even cause visceral responses, changing our very mood, positively or negatively. Names like Ghandi, Hitler, Obama, Bob Bradsher, Fred Phelps. Names are serious business. This is why for years many cultures have put great pride and effort into the choice of names for children. Some have a tradition of giving second names or nicknames once a child is born, to affirm positive traits observed in the person, sometimes hoping to call forth greatness that lies below the surface. Naming then becomes a form of prophecy some might say. It is a way of joining God in the act of creation, hoping to speak into existence something powerful within the personality of another.

This tradition was alive and well in the family of Abraham the patriarch. They recognized that names plot trajectories. Abraham himself was born with the name Abram but after hearing and responding in faith to the call of God was given the new name Abraham meaning “Father of a multitude.” His wife “Sarai” was also given a new name by God, she was to be called “Sarah” which many linguists suggest means princess. Their new names together make it clear that God intended for them to give birth to a family of many, and to a royal family at that. And they did just that. As Abraham and Sarah continued in their relationship with God they were promised a son in their old age but, convinced that God was not going to make good on the promise attached to their names, they laughed at the idea of having a child. As is so often the case, God had the last laugh and eventually they gave birth to a baby boy. And they continued in the tradition of giving meaningful names, by naming their son Isaac meaning “laughing one” or “laughter.”

And then Isaac grows up and marries Rebekah and they have difficulty conceiving children so Isaac prays to the Lord and the two conceive twins. But the blessing quickly feels like a curse as the two babies struggle or wrestle within Rebekah’s body until she cries out in anguish. Still though, through the pain the promise is fulfilled and Rebekah gives birth. Esau is born first and his younger brother comes into the world holding onto his heel and in the family tradition of giving names with meaning, they call the younger boy Jacob which means something like “to grab by the heel” or “to supplant” because he tried to supplant the place of his brother as firstborn.

And the name is powerful indeed, because this starts for Jacob a lifetime of supplanting. He later tricks his older brother out of his rightful inheritance and then tricks his father into giving him the blessing that rightfully belongs to his older brother on their father’s deathbed. Jacob lives into what people have called him every step of the way. When his uncle finally turns the tables on him later in life, rather than humbly learn his lesson he takes the first chance he gets to steal from his uncle and run away with the ill-gotten goods. It seems that Jacob is destined or determined to live into his name. All throughout life he takes anything he wants from anyone, but what goes around comes around. Eventually Jacob’s lifestyle catches up to him and he has to leave his uncle’s house forever and finds himself having to go back to the land of his brother whom he cheated so horribly.

And this is where our Old Testament text for the morning picks up. Jacob and his family have left the house of his uncle Laban and are on their way to Jacob’s homeland and Jacob is worried about what may happen at the hands of his angry brother, Esau. He knows nowhere to go but back to the land of his brother and, understandably, he is fearful on the long journey toward Canaan. And one night by the river Jabbok, in the middle of his journey, after having sent his family along ahead of him toward the destination, Jacob experiences something horrifying. Out of nowhere a man takes hold of him and wrestles him to the ground. And here Jacob finds himself wrestling for dear life. While he’s running, running from the threat of a self-destructive past, and

running toward God's promise of a brighter future, he wrestles. In between Haran and Canaan, in between the place that is familiar and the place that is the promise, in between the life he has known and the life God has in store, he... finds... himself... wrestling.

And this moment becomes a living metaphor for Jacob's whole life and for all of our lives. Wrestling. Seemingly always fighting, always writhing and tussling against forces surrounding us and sometimes within us. Always pushing and praying, trying to break free from things that are sometimes more powerful than ourselves and that seem to want to hold us stagnate. Wrestling by the river.

And in the middle of the wrestling match Jacob's opponent does something peculiar. Verse 25 tells us that when morning approaches the man strikes Jacob in the hip area and Jacob's hip comes out of joint. But Jacob, who wrestled way back in the womb, seems to be unphased. He holds on to his opponent for dear life, unwilling to break his grasp. And when it becomes clear that Jacob has no intention of letting go the man shouts, "let me go, for the day is breaking." And Jacob delivers one of the best lines in Scripture, "I won't let you go until you bless me."

The man's response is to ask his name and Jacob replies truthfully, telling him that his name is Jacob. Interestingly enough the Hebrew word Jabbok, the name of the river where they wrestle and where Jacob reveals his name means "to pour out." And I love that name because I like to think that this is the place where Jacob, in the middle of his struggling, finally pours everything out at the foot of his unidentified opponent. No more excuses, no more lies, no more deception or self-delusion; he admits that he is deceiver, he is supplanter, he is Jacob. (Strong pause)

Often we rush past this point in the story, but there's something here that we must not miss. Believe it or not, Jacob has taken a leap of faith by being honest about his name. We know that Jacob is currently on the run, fearful of the wrath of his brother. It is quite reasonable then for Jacob to fear that this person who has found him and grabbed him is working for his brother and has come to either kill him or take him to Esau by force. So Jacob's choice to self-identify honestly, to be real with himself about who he was, to admit to himself and to this opponent that he is "Jacob," is a major out-pouring of truth. Jacob is honest, possibly for the first time in his life. And it's interesting that this occurs at the dawning of a new day because this starts the path to a new beginning for Jacob. Remember Jacob cried out for a blessing. And when Jacob requests the blessing, he's made to remember his name, who he's been. See, sometimes we've got to admit where we are before we can get where God is taking us. And what happens when Jacob pours out his reality without pretense, when he honestly tells his name? It is changed immediately! The man says to him, "your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." Another name change! And then he blesses Jacob.

And by this time in the story it becomes clear that Jacob is dealing with more than just another man. We learn through the action and words that this was indeed divine presence manifested in grabbable flesh. The narrative gives many clues that this is God or at least a heavenly representative of God. First is the fact that the being is able to bless him. Next, Jacob is here engaged in the same way that God engaged his forefather, Abraham. When God enters a situation God does not leave it the way it was, God changes identities, God changes names. As it was with Abraham and Sarah as it will be with Saul who becomes Paul and Simon who becomes Peter, God is in the business of changing names. Not only that but we have to remember the ancient Hebrew tradition that no one sees God and lives. As with Moses who was not allowed to see the glory of God's face even as he received the commandments, no one could see the face of God and live. And there's another clue in what the man says to Jacob before blessing him, he says "now you have struggled with God and men." This is God on the scene and it's probable that Jacob figured it out himself at some point in the wrestling match, that's why he boldly asks for a blessing. This changes everything. (Pause)

Now that we know Jacob has been wrestling with God all along, we recognize that we've not been reading an account of a fight, we've actually peeked into a love story. Think about it. Certainly we are not to read the narrative as saying that God COULD NOT get out of Jacob's hold. To believe that the God of the Universe could be prevented from escaping the grasp of a man goes against logic itself, not to mention against Scripture's testimony to the omnipotence of God. It makes sense then to read the story as saying that God has purposely committed, out of love, to stick right there with Jacob in the midst of his wrestling. God is not held captive here except by God's own love. God isn't unable to get out of Jacob's grasp, rather God has chosen to be there with Jacob as Jacob wrestles in his brokenness. As Jacob wrestles with the name that his parents assigned to him, wrestles with the name that he has lived down to, struggles with what he has been called all his life (liar, deceiver, cheater), he also wrestles with the weight of the destiny God has placed before him as a child of the promise. God doesn't just say "be Israel" and leave him to it. God doesn't just give orders and watch from a distance, but the mighty Lord of life takes on flesh and wrestles all night long with his creation, refusing to let go until Jacob comes to himself. God doesn't leave Jacob alone to transform himself, rather God sticks with him as he wrestles, slowly become something new. The blessing Jacob gets is not just a new identity but also divine companionship along the path to the transformation.

And isn't it good news that our God isn't a distance dictator, barking out orders to woeful creatures from an unreachable throne? Isn't it good news that our God is not inclined to stand idly by as we wrestle alone by the river? That God does not make a game out of watching us struggle alone under the weight of our sins and our past. Isn't it good news that the hand of God is constantly reaching out in desperate pursuit holding onto us when we're too foolish to recognize that familiar touch of divinity? Isn't it good to know that God faithfully holds on to us even when we simultaneously hold on to what is going to bless us the moment we let it go. (Pause) I don't know about you, but I'm glad that I've got a God who doesn't mind wrestling with me even when I'm fighting against my own best interests. A God who will strike me to show me whose really in control when I think I have the strength to fight my battles on my own. A God who is too in love with me to ever let go even when I fight Him with everything I've got. That's the God I serve!

But that's not the end of the story. Remember that after giving Jacob a new name and blessing him, Jacob has a request for the man he meets by the river. Seeming to have grasped the power of names, he asks for the name of this shadowy figure, and the response is one of dismissal. "Why do you ask my name?" This is in keeping with the tradition mentioned earlier, that the face of God but also the name of God is holy and withheld from humanity. Throughout the whole of the Hebrew Bible when someone dares to ask for a name to put with the power they've seen displayed by God, the response is always something similar to what Jacob is told. "Why ask for my name?" It's there in the story of Moses a few generations later, when he was commissioned by God to go to Pharaoh. Moses asked who he should say has sent him, and God responds by simply saying "I am that I am." God's name is guarded zealously. In the giving of the 10 Commandments the people are told to keep it holy and not use it in vain. They take the name so seriously that when they are given the holy name of God everyone is forbidden to speak it and it is only written without vowels so that no one will dare to say it aloud in vain, causing a possible curse upon himself or herself or even the whole nation. God takes God's name seriously!

And though it's natural for Jacob to want a new name to match this new experience, it makes sense that this unnamed figure does not give Jacob an answer. It's a part of the way humanity's relationship with God has always been up to that point. But God always has a way of surprising you. And as is the Lord's custom, the name doesn't stay removed from us forever. Because a man by the name of Isaiah is inspired in the 8th century BCE to write about a suffering servant who shall step forth in the fullness of time. And of this servant it is said that he shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Almighty God, and the Everlasting Father. Sadly Isaiah didn't live long enough to see this servant, his bones were laid to rest too soon. But about 800 years later, the Bible tells me, there was a man by the name of Joseph who took a fiancée named Mary. And before they were to be married it was discovered that the woman was with child. And God spoke through the voice of angels saying not to worry, for the baby was conceived by the Holy Ghost. And when they were unsure what to call this God-child, it was told unto them, "don't worry, I've already got a name." "His name shall be Jesus, for He shall save

His people from their sins.” That makes me imagine God in heaven when Moses asked for a name, thinking “Just you wait, the name is on the way.” I can imagine God in heaven when Jacob asked for the name of the shadowy opponent by the side of the river, God thinking “Just you wait, I’ve got a name on the way.” The mystery of the missing name is solved forever. I’m so glad / that God didn’t get tired out / wrestling with Jacob on that fateful day. But rather / when the time had come for the truth to be revealed / God stepped down from heaven again / wrapped in flesh but with all power in His hands. And as Paul wrote to the Philippians, “this Christ who was Himself God, did not consider position in heaven of prime importance, but emptied Himself and took on the form of a servant, being born in human flesh. He humbled himself, to our level, wrestling through this world just like us. And in the end this Jesus was obedient to Eternal Love to the point of death on an old rugged cross.” And now that is the name!

Now we have a name. In the Incarnation humans look upon the face of God and call God’s name without fear. We have a name! A name at which demons tremble and souls are saved. We have a name! A name at which every knee bows and every tongue gives confession. We have a name! A name that is a strong tower, where the righteous run in and are saved. Glory to God, we have a name! And I dare you, as you wrestle through the battles of this life, to call upon that precious name Jesus, for the remission of sins! I dare you, to call upon that mighty name Jesus, for deliverance from trouble! I dare you to call upon that awesome name Jesus when all other ground is sinking sand! We have the name. Jacob couldn’t get it, but we have the name. Jesus is the name! So “What’s in the name?” you ask. Victory’s in it. Salvation is in it. Joy is in it. Love is in it. Peace is in it. Your destiny is in it. And thanks be to God, as my ancestors sang, there’s power in the name. Hold on tight. Don’t let it go. We’ve got the name!