

## “What’s In a Name?”

“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

The second wedding in the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral* centers on Father Gerald, a newly ordained priest who is so nervous when presiding at his first wedding that he makes a series of mistakes that are both amusing and terrifying, especially for any pastor who recalls their own experiences of being nervous in the early years of their pastorates and especially when they are presiding at their first major service such as a wedding, baptism, or funeral. His series of gaffs begins when he ends the opening prayer with the phrase “*through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Goat – eh, Ghost – one God, now and forever.*” It continues when he asks the groom if he will take his bride as his “*awful wedded wife,*” at which point the groom whispers to him that it should be his “*lawful wedded wife.*” But perhaps the most serious and frequent mistake this increasing flustered priest makes is getting the names of the bride and groom wrong throughout the ceremony, to the point where the couple need to give him the proper names so that they might be legally married by this priest who finally ends the marriage service “*in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spigot – Spirit!*”

Getting the names of a bride and groom correct at their marriage service is not simply a matter of courtesy; it can have legal implications in the validity of the couple’s marital status. Watching this scene in the movies reminds me not only of my early nervousness in presiding at weddings but also of the importance of getting the names of the persons in marriage services, as well as baptisms and funerals, correct. I learned an important lesson during my internship to always have the names of the persons involved in the service written prominently in my worship book, a practice I still follow today mainly because I never want to be in Father Gerald’s shoes, even after all of my years of being a pastor.

Calling a person by their name is not only a matter of respect for them or a means of avoiding embarrassment for ourselves; knowing the name of a person is a matter of letting that person know that you recognize them not as a mere face in the crowd but as the unique individual they are. Our names are the primary means by which we are identified, the first question we are normally asked when we meet someone for

the first time or when we are engaging in business with a person or company. While our last names may change (as often happens in marriage), very few people change the name they were given at birth; being called by another name often results in an immediate response to correct the person who has misidentified us, because it is the name we bear that both is our main means of identification and the name by which other people come to know us. Our names are important because *“they are a fundamental part of our identity, linking us to our culture, family, and history, while also serving as a key tool for social interaction.”* (Jennifer Stanchfield).

Names in the ancient world had great significance because it was believed that when you knew a person’s name you knew something of their very being. Names given to a child are chosen with great care, and a change in one’s name meant that there was a fundamental change at the core of their existence. One example of this is when Abram is renamed Abraham after God makes a covenant through which God promises to *“make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing”* (Genesis 12:2). The man whose birth name meant “exalted father” is now known as Abraham, “the father of a multitude,” whose family will become the great nation through which *“all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* (12:3). Another incident in which a name change signifies a change in the person’s identity is when Jesus responds to Simon’s confession that *“you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”* by declaring that *“you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:16-18). It is not only the name of a person that is important in Scripture; when God calls Moses to be the instrument through which the Lord will liberate his people from slavery in Egypt, Moses asks God to reveal the divine name to him:

- “But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ ... God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.”’” – Exodus 3:13-15.

It is significant that one of the means through which God chooses to identify God’s name and relationship to the people of God is by naming Jacob, one of the patriarchs of the people of Israel. It is not uncommon in the Old Testament for Jacob’s name to be identified with God; the psalm that was the inspiration for Martin Luther’s famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” proclaims that *“the LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”* (Psalm 46:7). This reference may even

be found in the Acts of the Apostles, where in the sermon of Stephen the first martyr of the Christian faith also refers to *“the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”* (Acts 7:32). This reference to Jacob as one of the chief patriarchs of God’s people is so common that at times we may forget how surprising it is that a person such as Jacob might be named in such exalted company, and how this ancestor of faith was never meant to be in this position in the first place. Jacob was one of two twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, and because he was the second child to be born the birthright was not to be his but his older brother Esau. But from the moment of his birth, Jacob desired to obtain that birthright and all that it brought by any means necessary:

- “When her time came to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle, so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob.” – Genesis 25:24-26.

The name “Jacob” means “he takes by the heel” or “he supplants,” indicating that from the moment of his birth Jacob would devote his life to laying hold of the birthright that was his brother’s. His scheme to achieve this goal begins when he tempts his starving brother with a stew that he offers in exchange for what he desires: *“So [Esau] swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”* (25:33-34). Jacob seals the deal of usurping the birthright from Esau when, with the help of his mother, he goes to his dying father pretending to be the older brother. When Esau discovers what his brother has done, *“Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.’”* (27:41). When we meet Jacob in today’s first lesson, the one who has stolen his brother’s birthright – and with it the covenant promise that God made to Abraham and to Abraham’s descendants – is about to re-enter to promised land where he will finally encounter his brother from whom he had previously fled in fear. Jacob has in the interim met the daughters of Laban and fathered twelve sons; at the beginning of today’s reading, we are told that *“the same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had”* (32:22-23). The Jabbok River is an eastern tributary of the Jordan River located about twenty miles north of the Dead Sea; it was known as a frontier point for the promised land (*“And to the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory from Gilead as far as the Wadi Arnon, with the middle of the wadi as the boundary, and up to the Jabbok, the wadi being the boundary of the Ammonites.”* –

Deuteronomy 3:16). The reason Jacob sent his family across the river is that he had heard that Esau had come to meet him, accompanied by 400 men (*“The messengers returned to Esau, saying, ‘We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him’”* (32:6). Jacob is understandably afraid, so he strategically separates his family into two camps, sends gifts ahead in an attempt to appease Esau, and prays that God would *“deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau”* (32:11). For all Jacob knows, Esau still plans to kill him; *“the narrative stresses that Jacob is alone; he will not be able to call for help should trouble come.”* (Terence E. Fretheim).

No sooner does Jacob find himself alone that he comes under attack when *“a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”* (32:24). The assailant is not identified; Jacob may have assumed that it was his brother finally carrying out his murderous threats. But in this struggle, we learn something new about Jacob: the man who had been living in fear of his brother for over twenty years shows a tenacity that had not been revealed to this point. Not only does Jacob wrestle with his assailant until daybreak, but *“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.”* (32:25). The assailant at first believes that this crippling act will bring their epic wrestling match to an end he demands that Jacob *“let go of me, for the day is breaking”* (32:26), but even with this crippling injury Jacob remains tenacious: *“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”* It is at this point that the story takes a surprising turn as we realize that the one with whom Jacob had been wrestling is not his brother nor any other human being: when the assailant asks Jacob’s name, he then declares that *“you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”* (32:28). Now Jacob realizes that it is God with whom he has been wrestling, the same God whose birthright he had usurped from the rightful heir of the promise God made with his grandfather Abraham that is meant to be a blessing to all people. But rather than rejecting or condemning Jacob for this heinous act, God confronts Jacob and through this night of struggle reveals something that Jacob probably did not know about himself, the tenacity that would be required of the one whose name would forever identify God’s people.

- “The new name Israel joins the original name Jacob in the narrative that follows. He remains ever the trickster (Jacob) and is commended as one who has wrestled (Israel) throughout his life – even as early as the womb – with humans and with God, and prevailed. Perhaps the biggest surprise in the story is that even by God’s own assessment, Jacob wins!” – John E. Anderson.

Jacob's tenacity continues when he asks his opponent *"please tell me your name"* (32:29). Having received a new name that more fully describes this new aspect of his character, Jacob/Israel now wants to know the name and identity of the opponent with whom he engaged in a night-long struggle. His request is similar to that of Moses who wanted to know the name of the God who was commissioning him to go to Egypt and lead God's people out of slavery. But the opponent who readers know is God does not give Jacob/Israel a direct answer; instead, the reply of the opponent is the question *"why is it that you ask my name?"* (32:30) followed by a blessing. Jacob/Israel wants a name that is commensurate with the new development of his relationship with God. While God does not provide the answer Jacob/Israel desires (similar to the response of the angel of the Lord to Manoah in Judges: *"Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful."* – Judges 13:18), the blessing that follows suggests that God is a God of blessing, *"a deity positively disposed toward Jacob."* (Fretheim). Having received this blessing, Jacob/Israel names this place Peniel, *"for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."* It was commonplace in the Old Testament that God's face was not to be seen and that seeing the divine countenance might cause death (*"[The LORD said] you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."* – Exodus 33:20), but Jacob/Israel is willing to risk death for the sake of the divine blessing. As the scene ends, the sun rises as Jacob/Israel passed Peniel, *"limping because of his hip"* While this will be a "thorn in the flesh" that Jacob/Israel now bears will be with him for the rest of his life, This mark attests to his success and not his failure as he becomes the one through whom the covenant promise to the nation that will bear the name of Israel will continue to unfold.

- "The blessings spoken here by God enables the promises to be realized in Jacob's life. At the moment of deepest vulnerability for Jacob, God enters into the very depths of the struggle, binding God's own self to Jacob at that level. Jacob can now face any foe, no matter how hostile. Jacob is about to embark on a life-and-death struggle, and now he knows that God the wrestler will be at his side." – Fretheim.

On this day, we gather at the waters of Holy Baptism to celebrate the day in which our two brothers are born anew to a living hope as through this holy sacrament they become members of the church which is the Body of Christ. They will be called by the names by which people know them and which tell others about themselves and their heritage, in keeping with the promise the Lord spoke through Isaiah that *"I have called you by name, you are mine"* (Isaiah 43:1). But through this sacrament each of them will be given a new name and a new identity: *"...child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."* As in birth we are born into our families of origin and given the name that identifies

this lineage, in baptism we are reborn to a living hope and given the name that identifies us as children of God, as people who have been given “*a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 1:3). Our identity as children of God is one that is ours for this life and for all eternity, for the inheritance that is ours through baptism is the blessed assurance that “*if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:5).

- “Baptism is the gospel in miniature, portrayed, lived out, enacted. And the gospel is promise. And promise, in biblical language, is not merely the offer of a gift on the part of God but the very gift itself imparted with its offer. The faith that receives, is nourished by, and relates to baptism clings to the promise which centers in the reality of the forgiveness of sins. This reality produces the only joy that the Christian need to seek or should seek.” – Martin Marty.

Watching Father Gerald’s painful ordeal in the early days of his ministry reminds me of the importance of taking care in my practice of ministry, especially so that I call persons by their correct names in those important moments of their lives in which I participate. As we celebrate baptism today, we are reminded that each of us was called by God by our names because each of us is a unique and beloved creation of our loving God. Baptism also reminds us of the new name that, like the new name given to Jacob/Israel, marks the new reality with which we will journey through life. Each of us is known by our unique names, and each of us is known by the name that is at the center of our faith and hope: we are all children of God!

Amen.