

JACOB BECOMES ISRAEL  
 (or, “What Would You Do If  
 You Had to Wrestle With God?”)  
 Genesis 32:22-32  
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 Oakland Avenue PCUSA  
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 Celebration of Holy Communion

**Genesis 32:22-32 (NRSV):**

- 22 *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.*
- 23 *He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.*
- 24 *Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*
- 25 *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.*
- 26 *Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”*
- 27 *So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”*
- 28 *Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”*
- 29 *Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.*
- 30 *So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”*
- 31 *The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*
- 32 *Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.*

It happened one night while Jacob was coming home. Jacob had deceived his father, Isaac, and he had cheated his brother Esau out of both his birthright and the family blessing. And when Jacob’s mother Rebekah told him that Esau was angry and was going to kill him, Jacob had fled to his uncle Laban’s house in the old home-country far to the east. There Jacob had taken a wife [two wives to be exact], had raised a family, had become a wealthy man, and now he was coming home.

It was on the banks of the river Jabbok that it happened. The Bible has it:

*And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. (Genesis 32:24)*

Jacob had been afraid of meeting his brother, Esau, but it was quickly clear to Jacob that this man with whom he was wrestling was not his brother Esau.

In the darkness of the night, Jacob was seized by this stranger and all through the night they struggled.

At first Jacob must have thought that it was a **river demon** or a **spirit of the night** that had hold of him; for everyone knew in those days that rivers and nights were full of demons and spirits.

Old Testament scholars who are supposed to know about these things say that when this story was first told by the Children of Israel around their campfires at night, it was told as a story of their hero Jacob wrestling with **some kind of a supernatural creature**. (Cf., Brueggemann, Walter, Genesis, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 266-267)

And it was only later, when the story took written form, that the writers polished the story so that **Jacob's mysterious stranger became Yahweh God**.

In earlier stories from Genesis, the word "**aetiology**" had made an appearance. You will remember that the word "**aetiology**" means "**causal**" so that **an aetiological story** was told in order to tell **the cause** or **the beginning** of something, such as the Genesis creation story which tried to tell why snakes have no legs.

So, it is not a difficult argument that has been made by some which says that the story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger or the messenger from God was told around the campfires by the Hebrew people for *aetiological* reasons. They wanted the people to remember *the causes* of some things.

For instance:

- (1) What was the start of the dietary taboo about the sciatic muscle in the hip?
- (2) What was the origin of the name of a certain place called **Penuel**?
- (3) What was the reason that Jacob's name was changed to Israel?

Now, I must confess that it is not very important that we remember the dietary taboo on the sciatic muscle in the hip; nor is it very important that we know the origin of a place called Penuel or Peniel in Palestine.

But in terms of the modern nation Israel, the Old Testament people Israel, and the God of the people of Israel named YAHWEH, it is important that we at least remember where the name ISRAEL came from.

There is one Charles Schulz PEANUTS CARTOON which shows Lucy Van Pelt having a serious discussion with her little brother Linus.

LUCY: I wonder if I wouldn't be more popular if I had a new name. The wrong name can be a real hindrance to a person's functioning in society. I think a name which is consistent with a person's personality is important. I wonder what would be a good name for me.

LINUS: How about “Supermouth”?

POW!!! [Lucy slugs him!]

LINUS: I’ve got to stop this business of talking without thinking.

Now, you and I may differ with Lucy and Linus in understanding WHY a person’s name is important, but we could all agree that a person’s name IS important.

And in today’s story we find a person’s name being changed. JACOB becomes ISRAEL.

And in this story we get a glimpse into Jewish, Old Testament culture. The name of a person was closely linked with its bearer in such a way that the name contained something of the character of the person who bore it.

So, when Jacob had to give his name to the messenger of God during the wrestling, at the same time Jacob had to reveal his whole nature, his whole character, his whole being, to the messenger of God.

And in symbol of the change through which Jacob was going in coming to grips with who he was, and who he was in relationship to his brother Esau, the messenger of God changes Jacob’s name to Israel.

Now, you may remember that the word JACOB means “deceiver” and the word ISRAEL means “one who strives with God.”

So, Jacob becomes Israel. The deceiver becomes the striver with God.

What a wonderful story of change and a second chance! All of which has got to make you and me wrestle with the questions:

FOR WHAT DOES MY NAME STAND?

What do people think of when they hear my name?

What does God think of when God hears my name?

My dear friends in Christ: today we gather around this Holy Table to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper. We celebrate this Sacrament remembering that in the Presbyterian Church there are two Sacraments (the other Sacrament is the Sacrament of Baptism).

The Sacrament of Baptism is that which prepares us for the Sacrament of Holy Communion. For it is in the Sacrament of Baptism that our names are changed.

Before the Sacrament of Baptism, I was James Thomas Richardson. After the Sacrament of Baptism, I am James Thomas Richardson, Christian.

As the Apostle Paul put it: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that one is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” (II Cor. 5:17)

It is as baptized believers in Christ that you and I gather around this Holy Table today; and in the Presbyterian Church, all baptized believers, whether they be Lutheran or Roman Catholic or Episcopalian, are welcomed at this Table.

And Jesus is in the building!

Some of us present today will remember the entertainer Elvis Presley. One day I was driving down a highway and a sign outside a furniture store caught my eye which said “Elvis is in the building.” Evidently the furniture store dealer was trying to use the name of the late Elvis Presley to get folks into the store. Back when Elvis was alive and doing concerts, those words “Elvis is in the building” would electrify the crowds waiting to hear him. So, I say to you this morning, Jesus is in the building!

Are you open to the electricity of the Holy Spirit in what God may want to do with you in this worship service today?

There has always been a debate concerning today’s story about with whom Jacob was wrestling: some say that Jacob wrestled with himself; some say that Jacob wrestled with a spirit of some kind; some say that Jacob wrestled with Almighty God.

So, whether you are wrestling with yourself, or you are wrestling with a spirit of some kind, or you are wrestling with Almighty God, I want you to know that YOU are welcome to gather around the Lord’s Table this morning, and who knows, it just may change your life! Are you ready?