

Re-named and Renewed

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 2, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

With school starting back soon for many children, I think back to the many “first days of school” that I had. It may sound funny to say, but one thing I really hated on those first days was the first roll call in homeroom. You know, when your new teacher calls out the first and last names of each student in the class, alphabetically by last name, and you say “here.” Of course, with Buchanan starting with a “B,” I was usually one of the first two or three on the list.

I hated this exercise for two reasons: first, because almost no teacher I ever had pronounced “Buchanan” correctly on the first try [*Give examples*]; and second, because the roll always had my *actual* first name listed, and so everyone heard “Joel Buchanan,” which meant that I then had to explain that though Joel *is* my first name, to call me “Tom” instead, because my full name is ... and all that. I always walked away from that experience a little embarrassed ... hearing my last name get butchered ... having to share more about myself than I really wanted to.

Names matter. They matter because they’re *ours* ... They’re *us*. As Frederick Buechner put it in his wonderful little book *Whistling in the Dark*,

If somebody mispronounces [my name] in some foolish way, I have the feeling that what's foolish is me. If somebody forgets it, I feel that it's I who am forgotten. There's something about it that embarrasses me in just the same way that there's something about me that embarrasses me. I can't imagine myself with any other name ... If my name were different, I would be different. When I tell you my name, I have given you a hold over me that you didn't have before. If you call it out, I stop, look, and listen whether I want to or not.

This essential truth about ourselves is key to understanding this strange, and yet richly human story from the book of Genesis. In it, we see Jacob facing a life-threatening moment of crisis which would change him – and all who came after – forever.

You may remember that Jacob was a son of Isaac and a grandson of Abraham. You may also remember that he was the second-born of a pair of twins – the elder being Esau. They were destined for conflict. The text tells of the boys pushing against each other even inside their mother’s womb, and of how, in birth, Jacob came out, grabbing his brother’s heel ... and hence his name, *Jacob*, Hebrew for “heel-catcher,” “leg-puller.” And by idiomatic extension, “deceiver.”

Later, of course, he lived into his name by deceiving his elderly father who had gone blind – tricking him into granting the one-and-only fatherly blessing to *him*, rather than to Esau, to whom the blessing rightly belonged. So, when Esau returned from the hunt and went in to his father’s tent to prepare him a hearty meal of venison and receive the birthright blessing, both quickly realized that they had been deceived. And Jacob was forced to flee for his life.

The author Thomas Wolfe once famously wrote that “You can’t go home again.” Such a thought haunted Jacob’s conscience for the next 20 years, a timespan interrupted only by a mysterious, divine voice, coming in dreams, promising him that – in spite of everything – he would, one day, *return*.

And then at the end of those 20 long years, he hears the voice again. We don’t know all that goes through his mind. Maybe he simply had had enough. Maybe he’s sick and tired of getting a taste of his own medicine and being on the receiving end of his father-in-law’s games. Maybe he’s sick and tired of being sick and tired.

It’s time ... time to stop running from the things he has done ... time to stop running from a past he cannot change ... time to stop running from a God whom he does not know. And so, Jacob – with his wives, his children, his servants, and all he possessed – sets out. They set out for what he knows will be his day of reckoning.

As they get closer, he sends messengers ahead to inform his brother Esau that he’s coming, and soon after receives word that Esau, too, is coming out, coming out to meet *him ... with 400 men at his command!*

Jacob is *terrified*. He immediately divides his people and property into two camps, knowing that Esau’s force could only attack one camp at a time, which would then give the other camp a chance to escape with their lives.

And then (and only then) does Jacob do what you and I would *certainly* do – he begs and bargains with God! He knows how unworthy he is of God’s loyalty and faithfulness, and he *implores* God: *Save me from my brother Esau!*

Having so prayed, but then not taking any chances, Jacob prepares a little “gift” for Esau ... *bribe* being such an ugly word! Jacob had become a wealthy man, with many goats, ewes, camels, cattle, and donkeys, and so he pulls together large herds of each type and sends them ahead, separately, as gifts for his brother. The gifts would come in waves, with the hope that just as Esau is impressed with one gift, he would be presented with another, and so on, until he had received them all – and hopefully placated.

But in his heart, Jacob *must* know that he can’t bargain or deceive his way out of this. Not this time. For 20 years, he had hoped, one day, to go home again. And now, the way home had come to this, on the banks of the River Jabbock ... behind him, twenty years of running away, twenty years of lies and deceptions ... *ahead* of him, the elder brother he had cheated out of a life.

And so, this is it. Everything is on the line, and Jacob knows it. He sends over the river all that he loves. He says his goodbyes. And then he’s alone – alone in a desolate place that no one else could share with him. You and I know places like that ... places of the deepest loneliness and

darkness ... places haunted by the spectres of those we've hurt and those we've tried to help but couldn't ... places haunted by ghosts of fear and of regret.

What happens next is one of the most mysterious things in all scripture:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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 (vv. 24-25).

This comes out of nowhere! Is Jacob dreaming? Who is this man?! Is it Esau? Is it his father Isaac? Is it himself? Is it his past? His future? His faith? His fear? Is it ... his God? The mystery is such that perhaps the answer to all of these questions is ... Yes.

In the struggle, Jacob is wounded. It leaves him crippled and in great pain. But – he won't let go! In wrestling this mysterious stranger – the sum of all he had ever wrestled with in his life – he perceives that his wrestling is with the Holy Mystery itself:

Then the stranger said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." (v. 26)

Now it would be easy to over-spiritualize this. What Jacob is demanding is actually pretty straight-forward – to be "blessed" so as to survive, to escape, to overcome and succeed in the coming day. For all his life, a blessing was something to be *seized, taken* from someone else. To be *blessed*, he always thought, he would have to use his cunning and deception to wrestle the blessing from others.

It happened with his brother Esau over a bowl of red bean soup. It happened again with his blind father Isaac, with the aid of animal skins tied to his arms. Jacob had, in fact, spent his whole life as a deceiver and con-artist. His demand now is most likely an extension of his lifetime of conniving, as if he were saying, "Now that I have you, I won't let you go until you give me what I want."

But now the stranger speaks. "What is your name?" he asks. *What is your name?* This is the question Jacob has had a problem answering for a very long time. In the presence of *his own blind father*, he *lied* about his name, about his true identity. His is a name which he had both run from and lived up to, all his life.

"What is your name?" the stranger asks.

Perhaps the response is one of defiance, or perhaps even confession: "Jacob. My name is Jacob."

To which the stranger responds, "You shall no longer be called Jacob" ... the heel-grabber, the leg-puller, the deceiver ... "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but *Israel*, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 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.

Jacob does indeed end up blessed, but the blessing is not in Jacob getting what he asks for, but something much more valuable ... his heart's truest desire, though he didn't know it: a new *name*, a new *identity*, with new possibilities, *not* so he could now *hide* from his past, but so he could face it and so be able to live fully in the present and face the future with courage.

Jacob is no longer *Jacob*. He has paid the price. He has faced the reckoning. He has – in his own words – seen God face-to-face. He didn't escape without being wounded in the struggle, and he would carry the pain of the wound for the rest of his life. But he is no longer Jacob. He is *Israel* – now the father and figure of all those whom God has called to be God's own. And that includes *us*.

Like those who have gone before us, we too walk this long journey of faith towards our true home. Perhaps you're in conflict with your past, or apprehensive about what lies ahead, and so find yourself unable to live fully *now*. But the hope and promise of the gospel is that, on this journey, we are not alone. We often struggle, but we find that our struggle is finally with one who loves us beyond measure. We find ourselves *re-named*, living into the newness of a deeper, truer identity in the one who knew us before we were born, and loved us into life, and has never – and will never – let us go. In this unrelenting grace, we discover that we are now named *precious* and *chosen* ... and *beloved*.

The American writer Raymond Carver, in the last few months of his life, wrote a very short poem, which appears on his gravestone. It imagines a short conversation with God:

*And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth.*

To the glory of God. Amen.