

SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

Wrestlers and Trailblazers

Genesis 32:22-30

June 22, 2025

What is your name?

It's a question I teach my children to ask other children on the playground in the pursuit of conversation and friendship.

It's also a question I've used in moments of tension....

With the homeless man on the church steps in midtown Memphis who is suffering from an episode of acute psychosis, becoming agitated as he's being told by well-meaning security guards to pack up his things and get off the property:

Hey, hey; What is your name?

With a shouting protestor who carried a Bible in one hand and made a raised fist with other on the side of the road at a parade decked out in rainbows and confetti:

What is your name?

With the woman at the bus stop, phone pressed to her ear, who has just shrieked before melting to the ground in heaving sobs.

Honey, what is your name?

It's a disarming question. Cutting through the noise, it has the power to bring the suffering back to themselves and the ground on which they stand.

Psychologists call this the name-letter effect: we are wired to feel warmer and more positive when we hear our names spoken. Even by ourselves. It's soothing.

Names are powerful. And so they are usually chosen carefully.

I named my son Nicholas because growing up, there was a little boy on my street named Nicholas. He was an angel and I adored him. When he was 4 years old and I was 11 he asked me to marry him. He was one of the first children I ever got paid to watch, although I would have done it for peanuts, and I never forgot him. To me, "Nicholas" always was and will always be the perfect name for a boy child.

My own name, Sara, was chosen months before I was born, but my parents hadn't discussed the spelling until an hour after my arrival when the nurse arrived with the birth certificate and a question: *How are we spelling baby's name?* In tandem, my father said, "with an h" and my mother said "without an h." And my father wisely and swiftly deferred because my mother had just given birth. Hence my S-A-R-A.

Our names have stories. They carry meaning.

The protagonist of today's text knows something about a weighty name. The Reverend Dr. David Lose reminds us that "far from merely identifying a person, names in Jacob's culture revealed one's character and sometimes their destiny. And so to know a person's name is to have a certain power over that person... *"Hey! I know you."*

Jacob means "supplanter." If I were Jacob living before the restoration of this name I would have had some questions for the elders.

But it was fitting, because Jacob—as the story goes—arrived clinging to the heel of his twin brother, Esau—setting in motion what would be a decades-long rivalry and rift between them as Jacob connived and tricked and outright stole from Esau the things that he wanted. It all reached a breaking point when Jacob tricked his half-blind father into conferring the blessing meant for the eldest son on him. Then to escape the brotherly wrath he was sure would come, he ran away. Far away and for a long time.

Today's episode takes place years later when Jacob, still a man on the run because he's still a bridge-burner, learns that Esau is coming to meet him. Esau, the brother he cheated, is coming with 400 men.

Jacob sends his family down a ways; there's wealth to be hidden and people to protect. He's left alone. And a dark night of the soul commences.

This summer's worship theme is "shaped by scripture." My colleagues and I have been asked to share scripture that has shaped us, and this story—from the moment I really heard it as a teenager—resonated unlike anything else had until that point. Probably because I recognized it as true:

Dark night of the soul. Wrestling. Gift born of it.

My mother was a Presbyterian Pastor, among other things. And when she received a devastating recurrence of breast cancer in her mid-40s, I was just 10 years old. The God questions came fast. I questioned God's goodness and challenged the faith statements of my church. I bristled at adults when they looked at me with their sad eyes and said they were praying for a miracle. I gave more than one Associate Pastor for Children & Family Ministries a run for her money and a vocational crisis.

When I was 13 years old, my mother was three years into cancer treatment that was harder on her body than the cancer itself, and we took a family trip to the Grand Canyon. Her enjoyment of this trip was top priority and not a given, not nearly. Her advanced-stage cancer support group had been praying for her health and pain management on this pilgrimage, and for the week that we took in the breathtaking sights, she was relatively well. I got a nasty strain of strep throat; our first stop was the Grand Canyon urgent care. And in my 13 year-old brain, I decided that I was a sacrifice of sorts. Someone in our family needed to be sick so that my mom could enjoy this trip. I laid in the backseat of the station wagon and turned from side to side trying to get comfortable and thought these thoughts and prayed, "I guess if this is how it needs to go, God." My own wrestling ended in a kind of theologizing that makes me squirm a bit upon remembrance even as I recognize the importance of that wrestling.

For her own part, my mother wrestled—more or less—openly. I can still remember the time I came home from Sunday school and told her about a story where Jesus healed the sick. Accustomed to "a lesson after the Sunday school lesson" from my Reverend Mother, I assumed she'd offer some historical context, some textual criticism, maybe a little commentary on the nature of communal healing vs. medical curing in ancient Palestine. Instead, I got a look of longing, and the response: "*Yeah, I wish Jesus*

would heal me." No elaboration, no softening, just desire. A wish that this God we had devoted our lives to would show up and fix it. Not unreasonable.

My father, an episcopal priest and a professor, dove into books, his scholarship deepening and widening. As a child growing up in a nominally catholic family, he had been drawn for as long as he could remember to the artwork in his family's Bible, a wedding present to his parents. The depictions of the crucifixion were particularly captivating: *Who was this Christ who suffered so?*

My Dad came of age during the Civil Rights Movement, and the coverage of the church at the margins and ordinary people putting their bodies on the line for something that mattered expanded the lines of the world as he imagined it from the confines of his blue-collar home in mid-Michigan. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was especially compelling, a person and a subject my dad returned to recently in a book about the Black social gospel. He told a story about King that stretches the image most of us have. Not the bold, commanding King, but a wrestling King:

"Following a scary midnight phone call from a caller that vowed to 'blow his brains out if he were not out of Montgomery in three days,' King broke. 'I had reached the saturation point,' he later recalled. 'He went to the kitchen and made coffee, pondering fearfully what to do. He wanted to resign but didn't know how to do it without looking like a coward. He thought about his secure upbringing under his strong father. He thought about Coretta and Yolanda and the fact that his activism put their lives in danger. It occurred to him that Daddy King could not fix this problem; King had to do something that Daddy King often told him about—calling on the power within that made a way out of no way. Religion had to become real to him, he thought: 'I had to know God for myself.'

King quietly confessed to God that he was weak, faltering, losing his nerve, and at the end of his powers: 'I have nothing left. 'I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.' He had barely uttered the words when he felt a surge of seemingly divine something he had never experienced previously. An inner voice spoke to him, saying: 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and I will be at your side, forever.' It was the voice of Jesus, King believed.

One of King's favorite sermons, 'Our God is Able,' subsequently told this story through the refrain of a favorite hymn: 'Never Alone,' recounting that Jesus told him to fight on: 'He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.'"

Was Jacob's dark night of the soul all that different from King's or were the ingredients similar?

Real fear for your life and the lives of those dearest to you.

A saturation point.

A new and urgent longing.

A need to know the One who made you and stands in your future.

An insistence on being seen by your God. A demand for blessing.

The first time Jacob had an encounter with God in the night, it wasn't like this. God promised Jacob all sorts of good things. There was acknowledgement of it, appreciation, even. And a vow to stay in relationship so long as God kept giving him food to eat and clothing to wear.

The second time, it's different. Jacob engages openly. He tussles. He is direct about what he wants. It's not his usual way.

The dialogue revolves around names, both wrestlers insisting on knowing the other's name. When Jacob is asked, he obliges even with all that his name reveals about him, the very core. It's the epitome of vulnerability, the very power of confession, even as he insists on being worthy despite it all. The other wrestler gives no name, perhaps Jacob's confirmation that this midnight menace is God, the unnameable One. God's ways remain hidden; the mystery of God is preserved.

What do we make of it all? Certainly, to wrestle with God involves knowing and confessing our own names. It involves persistence in the demand for life and love. To prevail in the match with God isn't to have a hold on God, but it might mean to try. God rewards Jacob for hanging in there with him. Jacob is changed by this theophany. He is given a whole new name. And then a whole people is named for him.

Embedded in this story is a bold claim: **what marks the people of God is their willingness to enter the struggle, even a struggle with God.** It is where life in relationship with God gets interesting and intimate and generative.

Jacob—he enigmatic caricature from Genesis—finally did that. And it made all the difference for him. He walked away with a limp—a warning, perhaps, about what can happen when you exchange a superficial relationship for a living one—but he also walked away with a new name and a new calling.

A couple of weeks ago, I sat next to the hospital bed of one of our saints. She told me a story about sitting right here in this chapel in the middle of a difficult season, when she suddenly and clearly felt the presence of God sitting right next to her. When she recounted this story to another saint in our midst, she exclaimed, "God showed up!" And he smiled and said, "No, Jan; you did."

We are given the same invitation every millisecond of every day. To show up to God. To wrestle. To be sent forth with new names.

Tomorrow, this building will be filled to the brim with children. I pray that none of them yet the know the heartache that will be theirs to bear in this life. I also pray that through silly string and song and scripture that is alive, the story of God's love will reach such a sufficient depth in their cells that it can and will be drawn upon for the rest of their days.

Together at Vacation Bible School, we will be exploring what it means to be a Trailblazers, because the people of God were trailblazers. From the midwives who protected the infants from Pharaoh's wrath, to Moses who heard and heeded God's call before he was comfortable with it, to the brave souls who followed Moses on a path from slavery to liberation, the people of God lived into their namesake. They were the ones who wrestled. They entered the struggle for life and love. They prevailed.

And we can too. Thanks be to God.