

What's in a Name? ©
August 14, 2011 Rev. Sharlyn Gates
Baptism Sunday
Philippians 2: 1-11, Genesis 32:22-30

Today is a special day in the life of the church. We have the joy of baptizing a new member into the family of God. Adalia Mae is the daughter of Colin and Lauren (Dryer) Hanson; granddaughter of Gordie and Peggy Dryer, and Ray and Sue Hanson; great-granddaughter of Beth and Bruce Dryer, Lucille Walton and Carol Tucker. Adalia's Godparents are Katherine Fitch and Paul Dryer.

What's in a Name? What does your name mean? Why were you given that name? Named after a relative, or a favorite friend, or was your name a popular name at the time you were born?

I looked up the name Adalia – from an online “names of babies” book. That one said Adalia means “Noble One.”

Names are very important. They always have been – from the time of Abraham and Sarah, of Jacob whom our Bible lesson is about today.

Our name connects us to a people. I am a DeHaven of the DeHaven clan who came to this country from Holland via a couple of other countries, because of religious persecution. Harmon and Elizabeth were my ancestors who came here in the 1700's. Wherever I go, if I meet a DeHaven, we talk about this great legend that has kept a national club going all this time. I have a connection with a family that I don't really know, yet somehow I do. And it has meaning. It gives me a sense of who I am. It is my name.

Our last names – our surname – are an important part of our identity, here on earth. Yet when we come to be baptized, we baptize using only the given name – like Adalia Mae. We are all baptized with our given name into one, holy, spiritual family – the family of God. We are connected in this family through our baptism. We all are under one name – the name that our passage in Philippians says is the name above all other names – Jesus. It is into his family we are adopted in baptism.

So Adalia Mae is presented to us today by her great grandfather, an elder in this church, with her full name – Adalia Mae Hanson. And we know that the name Hanson connects her to a people. We also know that she is a Dryer – her mother's maiden name. She has an identity with these families that will mark her as a part of these people all her life. Her full name will go into our records so those who follow us in this church will be able to see the connection she has to a particular family.

Yet, when it comes time to baptize, it will be with the name Adalia Mae, her given name. This is the name that distinguishes her from other family members. And in using that name for this important rite of the church – the sacrament of baptism, Adalia Mae is grafted into an eternal family - the family of God.

Let's think a minute about Jacob's story. Our text today has Jacob on his way back home to face his brother, Esau. He is afraid, but he wants to go home. Jacob has accumulated much wealth while in Haran and he goes back to his family with livestock, wives, servants and children. But when he hears that Esau is coming with a whole army of people to meet him, fear takes over. Jacob comes to the river Jabbok and sends ahead his servants with many gifts for Esau, asking him to receive them and to allow him to come back.

Then he sends his family over to the other side and Jacob stays alone – again through the night – to face his fear.

This time, he is not met with angels or with the great voice of God affirming the blessings that he gave him years before on the journey out of Canaan. This time, a "man" came running and leapt upon him, wrestling with Jacob. All night long they wrestle, struggling to overpower the other one.

Somewhere, just before daybreak, we come to learn what seems to have dawned on Jacob. This isn't some ordinary man. This is God, come to wrestle with Jacob on equal terms with him in strength and determination.

But with the dawn coming, the God-man tells Jacob to let him go because the day is breaking. Everyone knew that to see the face of God meant you would die. It would be too much, too glorious, too frightening. Now Jacob risks death and holds on to God begging to be blessed.

God asked him, "What is your name?"

And he answered, 'Jacob.'

And God said, "Your name is no longer Jacob. Your name is now Israel, for you have striven with God." And Jacob asked the name of this wrestler whom he had struggled so close with all night. Perhaps the name Jacob has known for God – Yahweh – didn't seem quite intimate enough after this encounter.

But God did not tell him his name. Instead, he blessed Jacob once again with a new name that would represent an entire nation that would come from Jacob. A nation who also would struggle, wrestle, strive with God. Israel.

Jacob named that place Peniel – which means “Face of God.” “For I have seen the face of God and did not die,” Jacob said. (Well, he almost saw the face of God, but God, in his graciousness prevented Jacob from seeing his face in full.)

We are told that God hit Jacob in the hip and displaced his hip in order to get away. That was part of his saving grace for Jacob, so that Jacob did not see the face of God and die.

The next morning, Jacob – now named Israel – went limping through the river, continuing the journey home to face his brother. Surely, he thought, “if I could wrestle with God and live through it, I can face my brother and take whatever comes.”

We are told that his brother Esau welcomed Jacob home with grace and mercy and love. And Jacob said, “Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God.” He should know! He came pretty close.

This story of Jacob is encouraging for us. I think it is a great metaphor for how God joins us as we wrestle with our fears and with life in general. And even though the wrestling is exhausting to the point of almost crippling us so that we go limping though life, we can even take that as a positive sign. Limping for Jacob was not a sign of failure but of success. He wrestled; he did not let go or give up. God was very present, right there in the struggle with him.

So it is with you and me.

Our Key Points to remember today (written on your study and worship insert):

¹God’s promise involves not a passive presence, but an active, engaged relationship with us. In Jacob’s darkest and most fearful night, God came and actively engaged in the struggle with him. And although Jacob went away limping – that limp was a sign, a kind of seal by God of Jacobs success that night. He struggled with God and persevered. He knew God was with him and would go on with him for the rest of his life.

²In baptism, God claims us, and seals us, to show we belong to God. God may not come to us physically to arm wrestle us, nor do we often get our hip dislocated as a sign of that struggle, but we are invited to engage in the struggle of life and of faith with a God who is actively involved with us. When we say we are sealed with his grace in baptism, I think of the old DeHaven Family seal that I have a picture of– a stamp to show that was our identity – our family).

¹ Passive presence, active, engaged relationship

² Claims, seals, belong to God

³In baptism, God takes the initiative. It is not so much what we do as what God is doing in us. Our coming for baptism is our response to God's gift of saving grace. Our response begins at baptism and continues our entire life.

⁴The Book of Common Worship says that "The use of a person's name in baptism is its most important use in the entire Christian liturgy, for it marks adoption into the family of God." Today, we will witness that sign of God's grace being sealed forever in a child of God - Adalia Mae.

Names are important. We all have one and if we have been baptized with our name, it should be held with great meaning.

Would you say with me the memory verse for the week?

"Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus - The one who came to join us in our struggles – God in human form – came to show us gracious love and mercy, and to give us that assurance that God is with us and that we belong to God. Thanks be to God.

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³ Initiative, Response, our whole life

⁴ Name, marks adoption, family of God