

**“BEGINNINGS: Story of Jacob (Israel)”**  
**Genesis 35:1-26 selected verses**

- 1** God said to Jacob, “Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.”
- 2** So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him,  
“Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes.”
- 3** Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.”
- 4** So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem.
- 5** Then they set out, and the terror of God fell on the towns all around them so that no one pursued them.
- 6** Jacob and all the people with him came to Bethel in the land of Canaan.
- 7** There he built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.
- 9** After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him.
- 10** God said to him, “Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” So he named him Israel.
- 11** And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants.
- 12** The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you.”
- 14** Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it.
- 15** Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel.
- 16** Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty.  
The midwife said to her, “Don’t despair, for you have another son.”
- 18** As she breathed her last—for she was dying—she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin.
- 19** So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).
- 21** Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder.
- 22** While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it. Jacob had twelve sons:
- 23** The sons of Leah: Reuben the firstborn of Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun.
- 24** The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin.
- 25** The sons of Rachel’s servant Bilhah: Dan and Naphtali.
- 26** The sons of Leah’s servant Zilpah: Gad and Asher.

**Introduction**

Christin, Thomas, Nancy, Jack, Ling-Min, Pervaiz, Raj, Dax: how did your parents come up with a name for you? There are about 2600 names in the Bible. They strike fear into anyone asked to lead an Old Testament responsive reading for Sunday worship. Maher-shalal-hash-baz is the longest name in the

Bible. Names can describe an expressions of hope, a revelation of divine purpose, a prophecy of the future. Many are found in family genealogies, certain circumstances with birth, characteristics and traits of people. The name Nabal means “senseless fool” (this is what Abigail thought her husband amounted to - I Sam 25:25). Anyone here named “senseless fool?”

In our journey through the book of Genesis, we have now made our way through Abraham (father of a great multitude), Isaac (she, his mother laughed), and Jacob (he grabs hold of the heel, the supplanter, he undermines). In our reading this morning we have Bethel (house of God), Paddan Aram (the cultivated field), Rachel (God’s ewe), Ephrath (abundance, bearing fruit) especially noted as Bethlehem (house of bread), and the names of Jacob’s twelve sons, forever known as the twelve tribes of Israel.

### **I. God’s Faithful Covenant (vs. 1-3)**

God said to Jacob, “Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.” So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone.”

Jacob knew the many ups and downs of his life. You heard some of them from Pastor Chris last Sunday. Bethel had a unique significance for Jacob. Back in Genesis 28, the Lord promised him, “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” Knowing all of Jacob’s failures, God would be faithful to his covenant with Abraham. With your ups and downs in life, with your successes and failures in faith, the Lord promises in Hebrews 13:5, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (from Deuteronomy 31 and Joshua 1). So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid” (from Psalm 118).

Here’s a song by Mercy Me that speaks this gospel, good news truth:

“Our God is able, more than capable/ And to be faithful until the end/ And finish what he started/  
No matter what you've done/ Grace comes like a flood/ There's hope to carry on/ He'll finish what he  
started/ No matter what you face/ His mercy will not change/ He's with you all the way/ He'll finish what  
he started.”

### **II. A New Name (vs. 9-15)**

It says that God appeared to Jacob again and blessed him. “Your name is Jacob, but you will no longer be called Jacob; your name will be Israel.” So he named him Israel... “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will be among your descendants. The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you...” Jacob called the place where God had talked with him “Bethel.”

Here again, a name becomes quite important. “Yisra-el” is the combination of two Hebrew words: “wrestle” and “God.” First found in Genesis 28, the Lord reminds Jacob of his new name. How often we need a renewal of the basic understandings that initiated our experience of the Lord. For our Lord and Savior God has given you and me a new name as well.

A dear friend and elder here at 1<sup>st</sup> Pres was given the Persian name Kambiz Pezeshki. Kambiz, meaning “fortunate.” One analysis of the first name Kambiz creates a shrewd, aggressive, business nature, intent on personal gain, capable of logical and analytical thinking along practical business lines, definite executive and leadership abilities, however others may find you to be rather forceful and uncompromising. When Kambiz came to faith in Jesus, he legally changed his middle name to Andrew, in honor of the first follower Jesus – Andrew (a strong and courageous man).

In the Gospel of John, chapter one, it says, “Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ which, when translated, is Peter” (John 1:40-42). Notice the new name. Simon (he hears – like through the grapevine) to Peter (the Rock, he knows for sure.)

For Jacob to be named and known as Israel, God’s purposes are being worked out. First, Israel was to, and did, bring the Messiah to Israel and to the nations of the world. Israel was called and given the opportunity to mediate between God and the nations all around them. Moses emphatically declared they were chosen not because of any merit of their own. God chose Israel to be his covenant/kingdom people because he loved them with a gracious love to acknowledge and exhibit that God was their one and only King. Israel was made to be a “peculiar” people, to be a kingdom, a priestly people, and a holy nation, a nation “set apart” for the Lord’s special use in bringing the Gospel of grace to all people.

### **Conclusion**

When I was to be “confirmed” in the Roman Catholic Church, I was 12 years old. I had no clue what it meant to be a Christian. When the bishop came down the center isle he was swinging an incense censer spewing a cloud of smoke. I’d never seen one before. I began choking and coughing, sure that God was out to get me. And yet, I chose “John” as my new name; Michael James John Imperiale. Little did I know that John means, “Yahweh is gracious, he has shown favor.”

What’s your new name? The new name for Israel is “Ecclesia,” the church, the called-out ones. We, too, have the spiritual mandate called for loving fellowship with God and each other; worship that would glorify our sovereign Lord. We, too, are to be a holy nation to exhibit the kingdom of God to the world around us. In I Peter 2, the word of God says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a

holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (I Peter 2:9).

Like Jacob and every other biblical character, the church has its ups and down, failures and successes. Yet we are invited to come to the Lord's Table this morning to be renewed in the mercy and forgiveness of God. So, take hold of your new name in the grace and goodness of Israel's Messiah, our Savior, Jesus Christ.