



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

**Naming conventions**  
**Proper 13, Year A**  
**Sunday, August 2, 2020**  
**The Rev. Amber Carswell**

When my mom and dad were preparing for my birth, they went through what must be a rite of passage for the first-time parent: they bought a book of baby names. After great deliberation, they settled on two: Joshua, if I were a boy, and Autumn if I were a girl. You can feel the suspense of the story already. Mid-November rolled around, and after great deliberation on my part, I was born.

The doctor turns to my dad and asks what my name will be. My dad begins the rehearsed answer, the name "Autumn" halfway out of his mouth, when my mom yells across the room, "No! She looks like an Amber." Now, there are times when you prepare yourself for the inevitable trials of marriage, and sometimes they are sprung upon you when you're in the most emotionally raw state you've yet experienced; the latter was my dad's lot, and he passed with flying colors. One does not argue with a woman on the other side of 36 hours of labor, and so Amber I became.

It's not a particularly helpful name, to be honest. It's mine, but it's also others', and I think in general it conjures a picture of a woman in the 80s with big hair and heavy eye makeup. Maybe that's just me. But it told me nothing about who I was, what I was here for. You know, how a last name like Peterson literally meant you were Peter's son, or Smith used to designate you as an actual blacksmith. I am Amber Accountson — a little more descriptive than Carswell, it says a little more about my lineage and purpose.

Smith and Peterson have nothing on Scripture, though. Names in the Bible are so stunningly literal that I wonder how funny it was to tell these stories and if we're just missing out on the joke. For instance: once upon a time, there was a man named Breath who didn't live very long. That's Abel, his name means breath. There's a guy whose mother laughed when she finds out that she's pregnant — so he'll be named Laughter. Isaac, of course. His brother will be named "God will hear" and when he's exiled to the desert, what happens to God will hear? God will hear. Ishmael.

And their names are always changing to meet the situation. Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, loses her husband and sons and changes her name to Mara — lovely name, you think, except when you learn that it means bitter. Don't call me Amber, call me Soul of Black Coffee. A little dramatic.

Today, we hear the story of Jacob's name change. Jacob, which means "heel", and he certainly has lived up to the designation, cheating his brother out of his rightful blessing by tricking his vulnerable and elderly father, ran away for 20 years, now returning home, older and wiser, regretful of his heelish behavior.

Such naming conventions all seem a bit funny and, if imagined for oneself, constraining and absurd. Not many Smiths have continued in the noble art of blacksmithing. But it does touch on the power of naming, doesn't it? Historically, baptism was associated with the giving of a new name, and indeed babies were named in the Medieval period only at the point of their baptisms, though now one's first name and "Christian name" are mostly interchangeable terms. But it was at this point the church tried to answer those two of the human heart's deepest questions: "Who am I?" and "What am I here for?"

It's telling that in Scripture, God makes creation by naming. He creates the stars and brings them into being by calling them each by name. Creation appears as an answer to God's speech, the Word goes forth and creates, makes new, and a resounding wave of God's own life bounces back to God, "it does not return to him empty," as Isaiah sings. Humanity is a particular piece of this whole movement, that God is constantly speaking to us who we are, and we, in the process of our creation, are trying to resemble that Word more and more, to repeat it back more fully. We are called, all of us; and that calling is to be ourselves, as particular as each star in resounding back a common chorus of God's self-giving, compassionate love.

Let me put this another way. When I hear someone talk about the will of God for their individual life, so often it feels like they're imagining a blueprint, put this beam here, put the wires there, keep things to code; any misstep is a misinterpretation of this frustratingly inscrutable Plan that God has — going off track over here means you've let down the architect.

But if the will of God, if your vocation, isn't some absurdly complicated Ikea-like assembly process, what if instead it's something like being who you are — that God names creation into being for the pleasure of hearing the Pleiades, the cedar tree, the Alps, the blackberry vine, the pleasure of hearing you.

I don't mean this in today's sense of just "being yourself" and the sort of empty self-fascination, self-satisfaction that doesn't see past the end of one's own selfie stick. I find people are actually very good at masking with those props, avoiding the real self, the real You, underneath the games and contrivances and indignations. Ask yourself: "What am I avoiding in myself? What am I refusing to see in myself that others notice right away?" It was one of the things that drew me to church in the first place, and one of my enduring convictions of its purpose, the idea that a whole lot of us were getting together to struggle through what it meant to be in communion with God and each other. Who is the me that God is calling into being?

Jacob loses sleep. He struggles all night with his strange visitor, wrestling with God knows what. We hear it's a man, it's an angel, but I wonder if he thought it wasn't a demon, given how grappling with the unknown in the pitch black of 4 o'clock in the morning feels for me. Jacob hangs on through that darkest of our hours, makes it to the daybreak that felt like it would never come. An indelible change is being wrought. The performances of deception, the trickery and striving, fall away now; he will no longer be a heel, but Israel: the one who struggles with God.

What a name, to see that all his struggles were not actually with his brother, or for his father's affections, or for love, or children, or freedom. He has struggled with God in all of this, for the revealing of himself, to know himself known and delighted in by God. All the rest had to fall away to hear his deepest calling. Most affecting, to me, is that he doesn't make it out whole and healthy, but his very body affected by the dying of the old self: Jacob is left limping from the touch of God.

Maybe you know this story. Maybe you've collided with something unimaginably greater than you, maybe it overtakes you in the dark and hopeless hour, maybe it's something that will leave you forever limping. Hang on. Sometimes that's nothing less than the blessing and mercy of that God, calling you into being.