

If I were to say the name Sophie Friederike Auguste to you, you would probably look at me like who in the world are you talking about? Much like many of you are already looking at me like oh boy where is *this* sermon going. However, if I said the name Catherine the Great to you, hopefully there would at least be some inkling of recognition, some faint trace of world history from high school or college slowly creeping to the forefront of your mind like yes, maybe, something about her in history. Now, what if I told you, they were the same person? Sophie Friederike Auguste was born in Prussia, a part of the Holy Roman Empire on May 2, 1729. She became Catherine, the Great would come later, on June 28, 1744. So what sparked the change?

Well, being born in Prussia and being born into powerful and royal German family, Sophie was born and raised Lutheran. Her family was devout and faithful and through her early years, this was who she was, a noble, Lutheran girl named Sophie. However, when it became apparent that there was a need to enhance the relationship between Prussia and Russia in order to diminish the growing clout of Austria, Sophie became engaged to the future Peter III. Now here's the thing, being Lutheran in Russia wasn't going to earn you many favors, let alone loyalty for one's future reign. So, Sophie, who was unbelievably ambitious and had an eye towards the future,

converted from Lutheranism to Russian Orthodoxy to the deep consternation of her family, and on June 28, she renounced whom she had been, Sophie of Prussia, and she became Catherine of Russia, soon to be Catherine the Great.

Now, why is this a big deal? Well, in the annals of history it is a big deal, because Catherine's husband Peter was a bit of a dolt. He had a penchant for covering their bed in toy soldiers to play with until all hours of the night, he drank to excess, and for some reason flouted his continued faithful allegiance to his Prussian roots, walking around the palace in his Prussian military uniform, encouraging his own military to sport those colors as opposed to the colors of their home, Russia. Remember I said Catherine was ambitious? Recognizing the reality that her husband was no emperor and would not lead Russia anywhere good, Catherine played upon her intelligence *and* her name change, a symbol of her undying devotion to Russia and its culture, to persuade her husband's military to declare allegiance to *her*, and on his birthday, rather than greeting Peter at their palace with words of welcome, Catherine was in St. Petersburg being declared empress with a letter soon following to her husband demanding his abdication. If Catherine had remained Sophie, the political arc of Russia might have been entirely different and who knows what the world would

look like today, but because she let go of what once was, and lived into who she knew she could be...the world was never the same.

It's no small thing, changing your name. Our identities, our histories, our paths forward all feel intimately tied to the name by which we call ourselves, the name which others can use to call us into relationship. I sometimes wonder how might life might have been even slightly different if I had been born at a normal weight, leaving my parents to choose between the typical 80's baby names of Ashley and Nicole, as opposed to going with a name close to tiny. For our transgender siblings, the choosing of a new name is a huge mark of becoming who they know themselves to be within, and claiming that identity as their own. And of course throughout the Bible the examples are rampant. Abram and Sarai were changed to Abraham and Sarah when it became clear that their descendants would be as numerous as their stars and their relationship with God would be a covenant, not just a casual we worship you sort of thing. Saul became Paul when his entire life was changed before his very eyes and he renounced his ways of persecuting the church and decided to help grow it. Simon Peter became just Peter when Jesus declared that upon him, his rock, Christ would grow the church. And, of course, here we find ourselves this morning with Jacob, Jacob who by the end of the lesson will not be Jacob anymore but Israel.

Jacob is one of the hardest figures in the Bible to get a grip on; his story swinging from hero to villain like a pendulum depending on the day and who he's dealing with. His story has been fraught from the very beginning when he was born with a death grip upon the heel of his twin brother Esau. It only got more complicated as his mother played on his ambition and desire to be the best by helping him steal his brother's birthright and blessing from their dying father. He then moved away to start his own life and got roped into 14 years of indentured servitude to his future father-in-law all so he could marry his beloved Rachel, while also getting her sister Leah out of the situation, because his father-in-law took a page from Jacob's book and tricked him into thinking Leah was Rachel on their wedding night. All throughout this saga, there has been one underlying constant in Jacob's life, a back and forth, nagging battle for land, property, and power with Esau. And it is at the climax of this relationship where we find Jacob this morning, on the banks of the River Jabbok contemplating how his life has brought him here and what will happen next.

Jacob is facing the very real possibility that he will not survive the next day. His brother's army is bigger, stronger, and more capable. He's is facing the possibility of leaving his now, not insignificantly sized family, to fend for themselves, knowing his brother will most likely not be kind to

them in the aftermath. So, Jacob leaves his family on one side of the river and stays on the opposite bank on his own to contemplate where he is been and where he is going and in the interim...a wrestling match breaks out. Now, you can debate and wonder and question, is this an angel, is this God in human form, is this a mental image of Jacob wrestling with himself, the semantics and details aren't truly vital. The point here is that Jacob is on the brink of monumental change. He knows who he has been and what has brought him here and he's not sure he wants to be that guy anymore. So he spends the entire night up until the brink of dawn wrestling with this nameless figure. As dawn approaches, the match is still at a standstill, but Jacob refuses to concede unless the figure will bless him, and ultimately they do. They bless him and declare that from this point on, he's not Jacob anymore, but Israel, Israel who has prevailed with God, with humans, and ultimately with himself, and prevailed.

I wish I could say that from this point on Israel was the perfect human, but that's just not possible considering the whole Joseph is my favorite kid thing, however, what happened on the banks of the Jabbok is no less admirable because of it. As humans we are not inclined to always admit our struggles whether they are personal, familial, or spiritual. We hoard our struggles deep within us out of shame, fear, the engrained mentality that we

just need to suck it up and move on with our day. And if we're honest, we have all had those moments when someone is opening up about their struggles where our inner dialogue says, "Oh here they go again, talking about all of their stuff." Yet, confronting our struggles, owning them, wrestling with them is an immense act of courage, because it is us saying out loud this is who I have been, and I don't want to be that person anymore. It is declaring for the world, or at least for some small corner of our world that this is who we are. Jacob didn't want to be the sniveling, vindictive, little brother anymore. He was a man, and he knew he had to change, and so he confronted his old self and the God whom he cherished, and he wrestled that old self until the break of day, coming out a new man in the process.

For all of us, the struggles which we wrestle sometimes in the dead of night are not the same. We struggle with addiction, with doubt, with feelings of self-worth, with a desire to be able to speak our truths of who we are to the world, with anger, with resentment, with grudges, with prejudices, with questions of why, why them, why me, why this diagnosis, why this thing, with faith, with the question of where God is in the mess of this world and the messiness of our lives, and we sometimes dare God to show up and prove Godself even if that means a wrestling match by a river. And sometimes in the midst of the struggle we are extremely tempted to give up,

to throw up our hands and say this is just how it has to be and who I am until kingdom come, so be it, who cares, we're done, we're taking our ball and going home. This is where Israel meets us and shows us there is another way. You don't have to give up or give in, you can fight and demand a blessing and dare to become the person you want to be before God, before yourself, and before your loved ones.

Jacob could have just as easily slept like a baby and said, I'm going to beat Esau down tomorrow and show him who's boss. Instead, he wrestled with the fact that that's not who he wanted to be anymore, he wrestled and he came out better for the struggle. Whatever burden or struggle or weight seems to be winning the match right now, the encouragement is to keep wrestling, keep demanding more, keep striving for who you know you are and who you want to be. God is there for the wrestling, in fact God will join right in and when the morning comes God, who knows exactly who you are, deep within at your very core, will bring blessing and will name you for the beloved child that you are. There is no shame in the struggle. There is no shame in the wrestling. There is no shame in declaring who you truly are even if the world disagrees. The God who meets us by the river, calls us by name at the font, and claims us as God's own, will never leave us, but will be there for the fight, believing in who we all can be. **AMEN!!!**