

## Devotion – Fifteenth Week after Pentecost

**Rev. Jeanne Simpson**

What's in a name? Do you know what your name means? Mine is the feminine version of John, which is "Yochanan"\* in Hebrew, and it means "God is gracious." I've always wondered if that meant God gave my mom and dad grace to put up with all my shenanigans as a youth!

When my husband Jim read this, he asked me what James meant in Hebrew. We know of several James in the New Testament, including Jesus' brother, the disciple who was the brother of John, and the author of the book of James. The original name in Hebrew is "Ya'aqov", the same as the Old Testament patriarch known in English as Jacob. The word became Latinized to James. The word means "supplanter," or "grabber of the heel." So a little homework for you – go read about when Rebecca has the twins, Jacob and Esau, and figure out why Jacob was called that name! And then read what happens when Jacob steals Esau's inheritance.

Now if you would like me to figure out what your name is in Hebrew, and what it means, put your name on a slip of paper in the offering plate on Sunday, and I'll look it up!

Bible names often are reflected in the character of the person. For example, "Nathan," the prophet who tried to give David guidance and correction, means "he gives." Jonathan means "the Lord gives." Jonathan was Saul's son and was David's best friend. The Bible says "their souls were knit together." As a result, Jonathan protected David at times from Saul's anger.

Did you know that "Deborah" means "bee?" The analogy here is between a bee, that while of insignificant size, can be threatening, and Deborah, the only female judge in the Bible, who took the Israelites into successful battles. A small woman, but powerful nevertheless.

Hannah's name means gracious gift. It is a name that for a long time seemed ironic, since she couldn't have children. But she prayed fervently for a child in the temple, so much so that Eli mistakenly thought she was drunk at first. Later he blessed her and said "May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." Hannah replied, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." The Hebrew word for "favor" (*Khen*) is very close to the word for "Hannah" (*Khannah*). Two verses later in 1 Samuel, we read that she has become pregnant with Samuel. *Khannah* finds *khen*. \*\*

Bethlehem in Hebrew is composed of two words: *Beit Lechem* (House of Bread). There is an interesting connection between the vital source of livelihood, "*lechem*" (bread), and the root word: "*lachen*" (to fight). Fighting has often been done historically to protect one's livelihood. I am reminded that the place representing food for life has over the years been a place of war and much death. I'm sure God grieves over a place that was intended to support life with its fertile nearby fields of grain (where Ruth gleaned after coming to Israel from Moab with her mother in law, Ruth), but instead has become a symbol of Palestinian/Israeli conflict. It is now in the Left Bank and has huge walls around part of it to keep the Palestinians out of Jewish territory to the west. A place where Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin's mother, is buried. A place where Jesus was born. But a place that has lost its peaceful symbolism of providing bread and sustenance to God's people. We can only hope that one day, all will be able to enter the city called the House of Bread and truly be fed with God's saving grace.

May your week be one of grace and peace.

**Jeanne**

\* There is no "j" in Hebrew – it is a "y," and is pronounced like a "y."

\*\* The "kh" sound in Hebrew is pronounced like "ch" in "Bach" – a sort of guttural sound at the beginning of the "H".