

Here I Raise My Ebenezer (Wait ... what?)

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 14, 2024

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines" ... Then [he] said, "Gather at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." So, they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord. They fasted that day, and said, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. The people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines."

So, Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord; Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the Lord thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel ... Then Samuel took a stone and set it up ... and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us." (I Samuel 7:3-12, NRSV)

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:28-39, NRSV)

I'm as "modern" a Christian as the next person, but I do love so many old-fashioned hymns. One of my favorites is "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (our opening hymn this morning – #356 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*), written about 1758 by the English barber-turned-Baptist-pastor Robert Robinson (1735-1790). There are few hymns in our language that can match this one for its deep, heartfelt devotion to God:

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above;
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's unchanging love!*

These words just take me away. I can barely sing them without a tear rising to my eye. I can only imagine the faith journey that inspired Robinson to write them, but you know there has to be a story – a story of God's faithfulness over a lifetime.

And that being so, the hymn continues in verse 2,

*Here I raise my Ebenezer,
Hither by Thy help I'm come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.*

Wait ... *what?* "Here I raise my Ebenezer"? What in the world is an "Ebenezer"? We've all heard the word before, as in literature's most famous ghost-haunted miser Ebenezer Scrooge, but what would *he* have to do with this hymn? Nothing, it turns out of course, but still, what exactly is an "Ebenezer" and what does it have to do with our journey of faith and God's help along the way?

I, like you, have sung this hymn for years, but had not really known the answer to this question. To find it, we have to go back to the Old Testament source of the word, to the story of the prophet Samuel. You might remember the story of him as a young boy in the Temple, mentored by the old prophet Eli, and hearing the voice of the Lord in a day when the voice of the Lord was not often heard. That young boy would grow up and become a bold prophet in the days of the Judges, before Israel clamored for a king.

In those days, without a *king* for the people to put their faith in (though eventually getting one would bring its own problems!), the challenge was to trust *God* – to trust in God's saving presence and provision – day-by-day. The constant threats to safety and security made that faith hard to come by, but Samuel knew that *God* was their only hope, and he continually called the people back to a persistent, vigilant faith, come what may.

The Philistines, we know, were a great threat for a long time, and our text this morning tells of one such time when Samuel called the people to trust in God in the face of the danger, and God delivered once more. And so, following this outwardly unlikely victory, Samuel took a stone and set it up as a monument (perhaps like the one on the front of our bulletins this morning), and called it “Ebenezer,” which a composite Hebrew word which literally means “stone of help,” for as he said, “Thus far the Lord has helped us.”

It was a more or less permanent way of memorializing and giving thanks for what God had done to save the people once again. He wanted them to remember, not just for a few days, but for years, for decades, even for generations, how God had come to the rescue, intervening with thunder.

Of course, this wouldn’t be the end of Israel’s story. Many more “dangers, toils, and snares” were yet to come. Samuel raising the “stone of help” was in no way a declaration that any *final* victory had been won, but that *up to that point*, God had helped them: “Thus far, the Lord has helped us.” And because they were never fully out of the woods, this Ebenezer had a key part to play in *reminding* them to keep the faith in the days ahead.

In this way, this strange, even funny-sounding, word points to things that are not so alien to us. Though I hadn’t thought of it this way before this past week, I have all sorts of Ebenezers in my office – on the shelves, on the walls, on my desk – all reminders of days that I lived through, that I *made* it through, only by the grace of God, a grace that usually came through the fierce love and gentle kindness of those who have borne me up when I would fall.

What are the Ebenezers of your own life ... those small reminders of times and seasons in which God truly saved you, and you know it. You experienced a strength not your own ... a powerful love that kept you going ... a hope to renew your heart and soul ... and perhaps tasted of that peace which passes all understanding.

Close your eyes, and take a journey back to some of those times *you* survived, *you* know you were rescued, and in your heart, you know who to thank ...

What, or who, reminds you of those, of such times and seasons? Or failing something concrete, what *could* you make, or build, or set out that *would* call you back to those memories, so as to give you hope and strength in *these* days – that the God who carried you through before, *will* carry you through again?

Those reminders, those monuments to God’s help, could be *anything* ... an old photo, or a quilt, or piece of homemade art, or an old trophy ... anything that calls to mind the saving love of God coming to us in the most surprising ways.

But even with those reminders, still we easily forget. Ebenezers can only go so far, it seems. Every new day can be a new crossroads of anxiety. It doesn’t seem to matter how many times

God comes through, for every new day can bring a new crisis of the heart and soul. We know this all too well, and Robert Robinson knew it too. He who could write those verses of such beauty, also bore witness to the struggle –

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let that grace now, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee:*

He recognized, as we recognize, how easily we forget, even *with* those reminders of God's faithfulness –

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love ...*

It's a fact of our human nature, and if our destiny depended on us remembering and getting it right every time, then we'd be lost.

This is why I love our Reformed tradition, and why I love the sovereign God proclaimed by the Apostle Paul in Romans, chapter 8 Paul understood the struggle (he lived it himself), but he also saw, as well as anyone ever has, the great hope of the Gospel – that when we falter, when we struggle to keep faith, that *God's* faithfulness doesn't fail ... that even as we wander and forget who we are, that God doesn't forget.

This mystery is far, far above our capacity to fully grasp and yet more intimately close to us than we could imagine. In Christ, God's sovereignty is revealed as sovereign *grace and faithfulness* towards *us*: God adopting us as his own beloved children, for whom the Spirit is continually interceding with sighs too deep for words ... for whom God is working all things together for good, as we work for the justice and love of God in all of life! In Christ, we are called according to God's purpose ... foreknown and, yes, *predestined* to be conformed to the image of Christ himself! And nothing will ever change that, for as Paul puts it in a rhapsodic conclusion,

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39, NRSV)

So today, looking back into our own lives, we again are called to bear witness to the faithfulness of God! We refuse to give in to fear or despair. Instead, we sing and pray with all our heart and soul –

*Teach me some melodious sonnet,
Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the Mount! I'm fixed upon it,
Mount of God's redeeming love!*

To the Glory of God! Amen.