

Here We Raise Our Ebenezer
1 Samuel 7:2-17
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As Chris referred to in her introduction to Lent at ECF in 2012, the Scriptural thread that will tie together our Lenten worship theme is the humble stone, chosen for its permanence that encourages remembering. At the end of time, it will be just the rocks that are left. You see, if there is something that will last almost as long as God, it will not be the cockroach, but the stone. As a collective species, our insect friends might survive a nuclear holocaust, but not every individual creeping critter. But it takes even the awesome power of the ocean a very, very long time to wear down a stone to sand, and the ocean can't reach them all. Yes, the Ebenezers we raise may still be there when the trumpet sounds and the dead are raised imperishable.

Archeologists have yet to identify which of the countless stones in the Palestinian desert is *the* stone Samuel raised in celebration of God's favor when his people defeated their enemy, but the stone itself *is* probably there somewhere. The ark of the covenant, the box which held the commandments, and the genesis of our story tonight, the ark may not have survived all these years in the desert but it is possible that the stone tablets have. There's a reason God gave us the commandments carved in stone. It is all well and good that the new commandment will be engraved on our hearts, as Jeremiah tells us, but our hearts seem like a

pretty insecure medium. It's a lot harder to store the human heart, like the Israelites did the ark and its tablets for twenty years in the backwater of Kiriath-jearim. Kiriath-jearim, you see, was like the Nevada desert to the Israelites, the place where you stored ancient near eastern nuclear waste, things so destructive and toxic that they threatened human welfare, things like the glory of God. We need a little background to understand why this Ebenezer stone was so significant to Samuel. The Ark of the Covenant, you will remember, traveled with the Israelites on their journey toward the promised land. They cross the river Jordan on dry land while their priests stand on its banks holding the ark above their heads. The Ark goes before them in battle. The Ark was power, containing as it did the very Word of God. But the Ark was not well cared for, despite its value, and it ended up falling into the hands of the enemy after a particularly bruising loss to the infamous Philistines. You may remember that after a brutal defeat in one of their skirmishes with their enemy, the Israelites asked themselves the awful question, "Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." And so they did, but when the Philistines attacked the next time, they carried away the ark as part of the plunder, and it was true what they said in Israel that day, that "The glory has departed from Israel."

That, of course, is not the end of the story, since the Philistines didn't really know how to handle to ark either. They thought they could just plug it right into

their own temple alongside the statue of their God, Dagon, but God would have none of it, and the Philistines quickly learned they had something too hot to handle. You can read all about this in the early chapters of First Samuel, but eventually, they loaded the ark onto a cart drawn by a couple of cows and sent it back to the Israelites, and just to make sure the gift wouldn't be returned, they sent along some gifts of gold, in the form of the tumors God had inflicted on them. Very classy gift, golden tumors, don't you think? But it worked, and the Israelites took back the ark, and after suffering their own afflictions while taking possession of it, decide to let things cool down by shipping it off to the poor folks on the reservation, I mean, at Kiriath-jearim, where it languished for those twenty years, during which the Israelites once again, according to their pattern during the time of the judges, went on their happy way until times got tough and they called out for God once again.

Well, that's a long introduction, but you can begin to see why the victory over the Philistines was significant enough that Samuel marked the occasion with the Ebenezer stone, the word Ebenezer meaning literally, "stone of help," for as he said, "This far, the Lord has helped us." But here's what I want us to think about this evening, that the stone did indeed mark the victory over the Philistines, but more importantly, it marked the repentance of the people of Israel. You see, that's the important part of the story, not the ark, not the Lord thundering in a mighty voice, not the rout of the Philistines, but rather, as we learn in verse six, rather, that

“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.’ ” They fasted that day and said, ‘We have sinned against the Lord.’ ” They engaged in a communal act of repentance for taking for granted the power and presence of God in their midst, and the stone was raised, and the rest is history. You see, what that repentance signified was just what Samuel reminded them. He tells them, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hands of the Philistines.” And they did, and God did.

You see, what Samuel understood, and what he wanted his countrymen to understand, and what we need to understand, is that good things happen when we get right with God, when we remember we are not the Creator but the creature. It may not always be as “cause and effect” as the Israelites saw it or experienced it, but perhaps it is that when we put things in the proper perspective, we are able to better see the good things that God is up to, that we are more open to the divine mischief into which God is leading us, that we are more compassionate and generous and righteous with others when we remember how compassionate and generous and righteous God has been with us. Good things happen when we get right with God. Notice I didn’t say comfortable things, or prosperous things happen when we get right with God, today’s passage notwithstanding, but good things, godly things. You can interpret the Israelite victory over the Philistines in

that category of good things like goodies, like treats, like rewards, but that would be missing the point. You see, God didn't deliver the Israelites for their own sakes, certainly not their own sakes alone, but for the bigger picture, for the greater good, for God's purposes, not theirs. Yes, they survived, and lived to fight another day, but they did so so that God's will, God's love, God's good would prevail. Yes, good things, godly things, happen when we get right with God.

Some of you come from traditions that do not celebrate the seasons of the year like Lent and Advent, and so you may be wondering what the big deal is with this Lent thing, why the purple, why the emphasis on penitence and fasting and sackcloth and ashes, why the special sermon series on remembering and stones? Well, the reason is this, and as simple as our story tonight. It is so easy to forget God. It is easy to forget God when times are good. It is easy to forget God when times are busy. It is even easy to forget God when times are tough, although like the Israelites, that is often when we turn to God. But it is easy to forget God when times are tough when we blame God for our misfortune, or overlook what is still good in those tough times. All of this is to say that it is easy to forget God in any season of our lives, and so we make sure, as a church, to take time to remember, to do communally, as well as individually, what Samuel called Israel to do, to "Return to the Lord with all your heart. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." Or in our case, our boss, or children, or anxiety, or hopelessness, or sin. Lent is that programmed,

not-to-be-forgotten, crucial time to remember God, and to remember our forgetting of God, and to begin that turning around yet once more, as the Israelites did once again as they gathered at Mizpah.

The author of the hymn on which our communal act of remembering this Lent is based might serve as a reminder for the need to remember. There is a well-known story of Robert Robinson, the Baptist minister who wrote the words to “O Come Thou Font of Every Blessing.” Robinson wrote that hymn at the tender age of 22, only two years after becoming a Christian. Listen to the words of the famous second verse once again.

Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Hither by Thy help I'm come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood.

Well, it seems that somewhat later in life, he was found riding a stagecoach with a lady who was deeply engrossed in a hymnbook. Seeking to encourage him, she asked him what he thought of the hymn she was humming. And Robinson burst into tears and said, “Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then.” You see, raising your Ebenezer is all well and good, but it should probably be revisited from time to time, maybe at least annually. Not only

did Robinson feel far from God later in life, he seems to have forgotten where he put his Ebenezer, as he later dallied in Unitarianism, and was at the point of losing his congregation when he died. There are many who find it ironic that the man who wrote the words, “Jesus sought me when a stranger; Wandering from the fold of God; He, to rescue me from danger; Interposed His precious blood,” that he himself wandered away from the truth he so beautifully proclaimed, and left his Ebenezer languishing in the desert.

Lent is that special, dedicated time to raise or revisit that Ebenezer, to recall the mighty acts of God in your own life, and in our life together, and to “return to the Lord, to direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only.” It is not that we should do that only once a year for six weeks, but rather that we should do it together for six weeks at least once a year. In a sense, Lent is an Ebenezer, a marker that “Thus far, the Lord has helped us,” and promises to continue to help us in Jesus Christ.

I want to close with the traditional words used on Ash Wednesday, the first day of the 40 days of Lent. Would you please stand? “I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Christ, to the observe a holy Lent, by self-examination and penitence; by prayer and fasting; by works of love; and by reading and meditating on the Word of God.” May God help to observe a holy Lent, as we raise our Ebenezer. Amen.