

Raising Ebenezer 7/24/2011 off to Campbell Farms

Just so you know... I am the substitute for the substitute.

Originally, in May, Ken sent out an email to some of us in the congregation asking if we would like to preach any of the three weeks he would be gone this summer. I had just finished preaching after Easter and so I declined. Then a little over a month ago, I got a second email from Ken telling me that he had filled up all of the preaching dates for the summer BUT someone had canceled at the last minute and would I reconsider preaching on July 24. Hence, I am the fill in for the fill in...

This cancelation provided an opportunity for me. Ever since our Pentecost service I had been mulling over the seeds for another sermon. Do you remember Pentecost? It was a fabulous joint service with the Korean Congregation. There was lots of music, loud music- lots of drums, and lots of hand clapping. We sang in two different languages and We sang from three different screens scattered around the sanctuary! We sang slow song, we sang fast songs, we sang new worship songs AND we sang Old Hymns. One of the hymns we sang was one of my favorites: "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing".

Whenever I hear or sing that hymn, I am reminded of the various times it has shown up in my life. But on that Pentecost Sunday, one phrase in the song struck me. It wasn't because it was particularly poignant. It was because I had no real idea what it meant. It is the phrase at the beginning of the second verse. "Here I raise My Ebenezer". Later that week I did my google search and was guided to the passage I just read.

But before we get to Ebenezer, we have a lot of ground to cover. Basically what I am doing today is summarizing for you the story told in the first 6 chapters of Samuel and then make a few comments. It is an amazing story- filled with enough intrigue and action that it could merit a Hollywood screenplay. This is for the most part NOT a story you heard in Sunday School.

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Let us pray:

O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them. Take our hearts and set them on fire for you." Amen

Chapter One:

The book begins with a barren woman. Hannah. She is mocked by others because she has no child and during her yearly trek to the temple, we find her desperately praying in front of the temple, pleading for God to give her a son.

She tells God that if He will only give her a son, she will give the child back to the Lord. Eli, the priest, is sitting outside watching her. Eli takes her to be drunk because her lips are moving but she isn't saying anything out loud.

She tells him that she "is a woman sorely troubled but she has not been drinking. She has been pouring her heart out before the Lord" (1:15) Eli doesn't ask her about why she is troubled but he says to her "Go in peace and may the God of Israel grant your petition". Several years later.... Hannah returns and leaves Samuel with Eli. Samuel will spend the rest of his life serving the Lord God of Israel in the temple.

Chapter Two:

.....opens with a song of praise by Hannah and then we find Samuel serving with Eli in the temple. Now, Eli has 2 sons of his own, Hophni and Phinehas who also help in the temple. Chapter 2 goes back and forth comparing Eli's sons with Samuel. Eli's sons have "no regard for the Lord" and "treat the offerings to the Lord with contempt" (vs. 12,17) Samuel, however, is ministering before the Lord and continues to grow both "in stature and in favor with the Lord and other men". (vs27). The chapter ends with a stranger showing up and speaking to Eli about what is going to happen to his family since they have low regard for the Lord and Eli seems to be turning a blind eye to it. "It's not pretty but I'll let you read that for yourselves.

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Chapter Three:

You will find one of the most familiar stories regarding Samuel. Samuel wakes up several times in the middle of the night thinking Eli is calling him, but it is really God. On the third time he hears someone calling him he utters the memorable words "Speak Lord, for thy servant hears." We remember these words but how many of you remember what God says to him? They are more words of warning, similar to that of the stranger that showed up in Chapter 2. *Look them up if you are curious....

Chapter Four:

WAR. The Philistines show up. I think the Israelites are like ants at a picnic as far as the Philistines are concerned because these people show up everywhere. There are too many of them and the Philistines want to keep them in check so they go to war to push the Israelites back-- to contain them.

The first part of the battle does not go well for the Israelites so they return to their camp. The Elders decide that the soldiers should return to the battlefield carrying the Ark of the Covenant. So Hophni and Phineas (remember Eli's sons) come carrying the Ark and away they go to battle. The Philistines at first are afraid- They have heard of this God, that made a path through the Red Sea and wreaked havoc in Egypt. But the battle continues.. Hophni and Phineas are killed and the Ark of the Covenant is captured.

When Eli finds this out, he falls off his chair, breaks his neck and dies. When the wife of Phineas hears the news, she prematurely gives birth to a son and she dies. Before she dies however, she names her son Ichabod meaning "the glory of Israel as departed".

Chapter 5

The Philistines return to Ashdod, carrying the Ark and what follows is like something out of "Raiders of the lost Ark". They place the Ark in their temple with the statue of their god, Dagon. The next morning, when they return, they find that their statue has fallen "face downward" before the Ark. They set the statue up again, but

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when they return the next morning, not only do they find Dagon “face downward” before the ark, but they find that his head and both his hands are broken off.

After this a plague of “tumors” afflicts the people of Ashdod and the surrounding territories. The Philistines send the Ark to several other locations- passing it around like a hot potato, but everywhere it goes, it brings the plague of tumors. After 7 months they decide to send it back to the Israelites. They send the Ark back with an offering of gold in order to appease the God of Israel.

The Ark rolls into Beth-she-meth and is met with great rejoicing. The people there make a great offering unto the Lord. However, some of the men “looked into the Ark” and fell dead because of it. The people in Beth-she-meth do not want the Ark to rest there and that brings us to Chapter 7-

Chapter 7

The Ark is brought to Kiriath-jearim and the people of Israel enter a period of seeking God and God’s forgiveness. All the house of Israel returns to the Lord with all of their heart- they put away foreign gods and direct their hearts to God.

Samuel calls the people to gather at Mizpah and he will pray on behalf of them before God. It is a large community event as we read in vs 6 **“So they gathered at Mizpah and drew water and poured it out before the Lord and fasted on that day, and said there, ‘We have sinned against the Lord’.**

Now the Philistines are watching and see that so many of the Israelites are gathered in one place. They could have been afraid because a gathering of that magnitude almost always meant signaled that a country was “rallying the troops” for war or it could be that the Philistines saw their opportunity to wage a war against a large gathered group that did not have any weapons with them.

When the people of Israel hear that the Philistines are approaching prepared for war, they tell Samuel “Do not cease to cry to the Lord our God for us, that he may save us

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from the hand of the Philistines". The Israelites don't run for their weapons or run to get the Ark. They continue crying out to God. As the Philistines draw near, the Lord thunders with a mighty voice and threw the Philistine army into such a confusion that the men of Israel were able to push them back as far as below Beth-Car.

It is NOW that we get to hear about "Raising Ebenezer". The victory is the Lords. The people of God have returned wholehearted to God. Samuel takes a stone and sets it up- He sets it up as a Marker, as a reminder- The stone and the place are now given the name Ebenezer, which means "Hitherto, the Lord has helped us". From the beginning up until now, The Lord has helped us...

It is important to have these markers for our faith.

As a people of God, as a Church and as individuals to mark the places and events where God has helped us.

The places where we have caught a glimpse of God,
the places we have seen God at work.
the places we have participated with God in the work of His Kingdom.

Many of you right now can easily think of one of those places or one of those experiences in your own life:

- *A church service where God 'warmed your heart',
- *A concert where the words of a song flooded you with meaning
- *a quiet mountain top where you were brought to tears by the beauty of.....
- *a particular camp where you realized for once and for all that God's grace was for you!

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Whether in the midst of a crowd,
like that of Triennium or
in the solitary quiet of the wood,
You have at the least, glimpsed God and perhaps even met God.

When Linda preached to us a couple months ago she talked about those type of experiences as mountain top experiences- They are experiences we can use as markers. Markers to remind us of how God has been moving in our lives. Time and again we "catch a glimpse", or "sense that we have met God" and then.....

And then and we return to the everyday. We do not live on the mountain top any more than the people of Israel remained at the stone called Ebenezer. They went on with their day in and day out lives.

Was that the last war that Israel fought with the Philistines?..... In the lifetime of Samuel, yes. But in the larger scheme of things, NO. Was that the last time the people of God wandered away and turned their hearts to other gods. No.

We are all prone to wander- We catch a glimpse of God and it is sometimes astounding. It is so clear to us for a while and then we get distracted. There is a lot that can distract us. We get overwhelmed with bits of our day to day life, our pursuit of happiness and our need to have control.

It is important to have these markers for our faith.

It is one of the reasons I keep my old Bible even though it is held together by duct tape. It is filled with notes and scribbles in the margin. It is filled with Remembrances of God's help. Verses underlined during a particularly hard time, chapters marked during a time of doubt or inspiration.

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IT is important to make a **distinction** here, too. Our bibles, crosses and other symbols of Christianity are not to be seen as “good luck charms”. They are not magic articles.... Look what happened to the Israelites when they took the Ark of the covenant to war, treating it like a good luck charm. They depended on the Ark and not on their God. Our Bibles, our preachers, our doctrines and our churches are not God in themselves- they are there to introduce us to God, to help us learn more about what God is like and where God is at work.

Needing a marker is one of the reasons I **have returned week after week** to a church. I have attended many, many different churches in the past 50 years. I learned a long time ago that I don't particularly attend church to hear the sermons. Even when I have attended a service where I don't agree with what is being preached in the sermon, I have in some way been reminded of God through the scripture, the singing, the statement of faith or even the offertory music.

Some people are able to carve out a **time every day** to be reminded of God at work in their lives. I have tried at various times in my life to do this, sometimes even with an amount of success. Imagine the strength in your life if you were able every day to be in front of the Ebenezer stone and remember that “Hitherto, God has helped us”. I believe it would be very powerful..... And yet..... I am distracted.

In our New Testament scripture that _____ read earlier we see Paul writing a letter to his younger “brother in Christ” to remind Timothy of God's love and God's power. He is writing in hopes that Timothy will be renewed in his faith through remembering all that they have been through together. He reminds Timothy of the time that Paul himself prayed over Timothy and laid hands on him as we have done today.

It is important to remember, to rekindle and to revisit the times and places where we have met God. And it is important to mark them as we come upon them.

For our youth, I know that many of you had an amazing experience at Triennium last year. I hope you continue to talk about that with one another. That you continue to remember when and where God was real to you.

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As you attend Campbell Farms this week take note! You know from past experience that God is at work there. Take the time in your day to acknowledge that and talk about it. Look for God, seek God and you will meet God in a new and stronger way. Raise up your own Ebenezer!

Yesterday I stopped by the church to pick up a hymnal and double check the words of "Come Thou Fount". In the quiet of the sanctuary, I decided to come to the front and sing the words out loud- For me they are powerful words- I have a history with the song, as does my parents church and as does the church since the words were written in 1758.

As I sang up front facing the empty pews,
a flood of memories came-

I remembered Toby's baptism-

Carris and Audrey's baptism,

I remembered The Christmas Pageant with Bruce coming down the aisle on all fours carrying whoever was Mary that year.

I remembered the day The Ravenna Presbyterian church and Wallingford Presbyterian Church became one and I sang a song during children's time to the tune of the Brady Bunch.)

I saw Ken and Laura Duff in the last pew and

Mel Nelson with a big smile on his face standing in the back of the church.

*And I saw many of you and thought of how you have made Christ real to me.

I saw all that and at the same time knew I would probably be complaining about something regarding our church within the week--

But at that time yesterday.....I was overwhelmed with God's presence in my life through my experience in this church.

Sentimentality you say..... Perhaps a little. But so much more than that.

I probably say the following words in every sermon I have ever preached

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but that is because I believe them so wholeheartedly.

God lives among us. God pursues us. God is there to meet us.

When you seek God and you catch a glimpse of God-
set up a marker- raise your Ebenezer!

You will get distracted.... You will wander away, perhaps for an hour, a week or 30 years
but God remains

and hopefully the marker will call you back and remind you
that at one time you thought you caught a glimpse of God,
and it will help you to see that God has been there with you all along.

Hitherto, God has met us.

Hitherto, God has helped us.

Hitherto and From now on, God is with us.

Amen.

*The words of "Come Thou Fount" were written by a man named Robert Robinson in 1758. Robinson lost his father at an early age and when he was 17 his mother couldn't control him and sent him off to London to apprentice as a barber. He instead learned how to drink and party falling in with what we might term, "the wrong crowd". When he was 20 and at a low spot, he attended a meeting where George Whitfield was preaching- the words of Whitfield haunted him and he "gave his heart to God" and later became a preacher. Robinson was constantly "plagued by his weaknesses" and he wrote "Come thou Fount" at the age of 23 to remind him of the time when he first met God.