

## “Ebenezer”

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Ephesians 3:7-19

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

It’s not yet 7 a.m. as I sit in the mesh chair on the retreat center porch that overlooks Pine Lake. The sun has only begun to touch the western edge of the water. My tent and sleeping bag are in the car. I hear the birds, watch the slow ripples of the water. The sights and sounds take me back to other camping trips.

Have you wondered when you sing “Here I raise my Ebenezer...” what an Ebenezer is? I have. But by the time I was home and could look it up, I’ve have forgotten. This week I did the research. This line refers to an early moment in Israel’s story. A moment of thanks. The prophet Samuel called the people to give up their idols and worship God alone. They all went out to a lonely place and fasted and prayed. The Philistines, figuring the Israelites were temporary distraction, attacked them. The Israelites had been victorious. Samuel, that prophet who’d eventually anoint a young shepherd named David to be the future king, recognized, and wanted the people to recognize, that God had been a big part of their victory. He took a stone, lifted it up, and named it Ebenezer – which means, “stone of help.”

The Ebenezer stone was a marker, a reminder of God’s power and blessing.

I don’t want to get into a discussion about whether or not God chooses sides in a conflict; you can consult Abraham Lincoln’s thoughts on that one. For now, let’s just think of this Ebenezer as Samuel’s reminder that there in that place, in that moment, he had been profoundly aware of God’s presence, God’s grace and guidance. For him, this stone was a symbol to remind him and others of a special God moment.

Most of us have mementos that remind us of special moments. The Two Gray Hill rug in my office is a reminder of my years living in Navajoland, of my affection for my students there. When I think of the time and effort that goes into this art form, I also think of their poverty, and the injustice of the reservation system that cripples them as a people. I’m reminded that God’s justice is for everyone, and that I have to speak up and act for justice. I can’t simply leave it for others.

The picture of Jared and Kellyn by my chair in the living room reminds me of the bond between my son and daughter even though they’re ten years apart. I’m reminded of how precious they are to me and that I need to make time to stay connected with these special people. Although I don’t have any “senior pictures” of my daughter who chose to be homeschooled in high school, she and her brother, and his future wife, had great times doing their photo shoots.

Last month Kellyn put an old black and white photo she’d found onto the fridge. When I look at this picture of my mother and my four-year-old self, I think of my father who took so many photos before job and life and four kids made it less practical. I think of how in younger years, I always saw myself as the center of the picture. Now I see the love in my mother’s eyes that he captured, she’s the real center of that story. I think of how maybe I’m growing up.

I could mention Dan Fogelberg's "Same Old Lang Syne," or hymns like, "In the Garden" or "Be Thou My Vision," the taste of an August tomato with bacon, or the smell of a Ponderosa pine, or mothballs. We all have reminders. Some are visual. Some are scents or sounds. What hymns or prayers are in your bones? Is it vanilla or cinnamon, or maybe baking bread that reminds you of your grandmother?

The purpose of an Ebenezer, as I understand it, is to call to our minds and hearts something that we might otherwise forget. That stone I have with the word *peace* written on it, reminds me to breathe and let go of the illusion that I'm in control. I can let God be in charge and rest in the peace that comes from accepting that I can't do it all.

This is part of what Robert Robinson was writing about when he penned "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." The first verse of his poem is full of praise for God's grace. He has experienced God's love and that calls "for songs of loudest praise." Robinson declares that he'll focus on God's love from here on out.

Then he speaks of his Ebenezer. God, his help, has drawn him into the fold, accepted and embraced him. God has rescued him from what his life would have been if he hadn't come to know Jesus. He lifts his stone. Like Samuel, he'll not only remember, but has made a sign so that others are reminded of God's abiding presence and help.

Verse three is a prayer: I owe you so much, O God. I know it. Keep me close. I'm prone to wander; I know I am. I don't mean to but I keep turning... I keep letting life distract me. Draw me close, then tie me to your precious self. That way, when I wander – because I will – I'll be able to find my way back to you.

Only he says it much more poetically. When we sing that 3<sup>rd</sup> verse, maybe you'll want to think about it as a personal prayer, yourself.

The words of our scripture are more formal – imitating the apostle Paul's letter-writing – but they say some of the same things. "God gave me grace ... I became a servant of the gospel *because* of that grace ... God sent me to reveal ... God's purpose is to show ... This is part of God's plan ..."

Or, in other words, I am yours, God, because you care enough to draw me close. You shower me with blessings – people to care for who care for me, food and shelter, purpose for my life, your continuing presence and steadfast love. And this is why, the lesson continues, I ask God to bless you, with a strong faith, with Spirit-given gifts that will help you realize how vast God's caring is.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest, professor and author, describes the gift of the Spirit as a gift of "new sight... grabbing us by our lapels and turning us around, so that when we are set back down again we see everything from a new angle. We reason differently, feel differently, act differently."

This makes it sound like Spirit gifts are life-changing? Yet isn't that part of what Robinson conveyed with his poem? If your faith doesn't change the way you do things, you might want to do some soul searching to see if you've closed yourself off to the gifts God wants you to have and use. After that, you'll want to make yourself more available for what God has in store for you.

Being open to the gift of the Spirit and accepting whatever it is God might give us, is part of the way our hearts are tuned to sing God's praise.

As a musician, I know a little bit about being in tune. Growing up, I learned that I could pick up just about any wind instrument and play it. It was fun. And I felt good about it. Gradually though, I learned that being able to play a tune on the clarinet, flute or horn wasn't enough. Whether I was playing alone or with others, I made music – better – when I worked to play in tune. This was something that needed ongoing practice. The more I'd listen and the more I'd play, the more my ear would come to notice and expect in-tune-ness.

Tuning our hearts to God also requires regular practice. Is this something we really want? Do we want our hearts attuned to God even if it means we're going to notice ever more keenly all the little ways that we wandering from God? Still, you're here this morning. You're looking, maybe even searching. For something bigger than yourself and your life challenges. For meaning. To draw closer to the source of all that is. To find direction.

Accept the words of our hymn, or our scripture, or both. Believe that God's love is deeper and broader than anything you can imagine, and that it surpasses whatever foolish stuff you do. Trust

that God knows that you wander and that you want to be drawn in, and that God will never give up on you. Accept that the Spirit-gift God gives you is meant to give your life purpose.

And take that gift, again or for the first time, and live that purpose – whether it's earth care or raising awareness for human trafficking by hosting parties for Better Way Imports, calling for justice for those caught in broken systems, or rocking babies ...

And live the life God wants for you, loving God and loving everyone else.

Amen.