

*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 thy redeeming love.*

Here I raise mine Ebenezer . . .

Okay. Okay. Hold it. Let's just stop right here. We need to take some time here to deal with this Ebenezer business. Every time we sing this hymn I have a moment of deep wondering when we get to the "raise mine Ebenezer" part. I think to myself, "Oy. What's an Ebenezer? I've gotta look that up when worship is over . . ." But then, by the time worship is over, who am I kidding, by the time the hymn is over, my mind has moved on to other things and I don't think about raising an Ebenezer again until the next time we sing this hymn or I'm reintroduced to Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, whichever comes first.

And since it is the season of *A Christmas Carol* with Ebenezer Scrooge's face likely to be making an appearance on a screen near us soon, and we just sang the line this hymn, AND I finally learned what it means to raise one's Ebenezer a few weeks ago, this is the day we unpack what it means to "raise mine Ebenezer."

I was sitting in my office early one Sunday morning a few weeks ago preparing for the 8:30 AM Sunday Morning Bible Study. I was reading the chapters of First Samuel we were to discuss that day . . . *And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car.* And I thought to myself, "Geez Louisee, more striking people down? More mayhem and violence? Who chooses these passages?!? Oh, well. It's too late now, they'll be here in an hour. Best keep reading . . ." *Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer . . .* "Holy cats! Ebenezer. There's the Ebenezer! I found the Ebenezer! It was in First Samuel all along!"

And here's what's happening in First Samuel when the Israelites raise their Ebenezer. At this point in the story, the Israelites are engaged in ongoing battles with the Philistines. The two warring nations, divided as they were by religion, culture, and societal norms, are fighting over territory and resources. Upon hearing that the Israelites were camped out together in Mizpah, the Philistines seized the opportunity to organize to attack them. The Israelites caught wind of the impending invasion and they were terrified. The Philistines had already decimated the Israelites in a previous battle.

By the time of this morning's story of an impending battle, months have passed since the Israelites got whooped by the Philistines. The Israelites have licked their wounds and are regrouping under the guidance of their highly-revered judge and leader Samuel. The reason they are all gathered together for the first time in a long time at Mizpah is because Samuel has called them there for a kind of revival. He has brought them together so they can rededicate themselves to the Lord, God Almighty after some significant instances of infidelity and flirting with the gods of other nations. The Philistines, seeking to take advantage of this rare opportunity to fight the Israelites when they are in a centralized location, prepare to pounce.

But, the Lord rewards the Israelites' repentance, renewed fidelity, and commitment to reunification by bringing them victory over the mighty and powerful Philistines. *The men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines*, (hear that, the Philistines are retreating) *and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car.* Victory belongs to the Israelites. It's an important triumph and Samuel wants to commemorate it. So, he takes a stone and sets it up as a kind of altar and names it Ebenezer, which meant *stone of help*. And Samuel declares, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

And so it is that when he raises an Ebenezer, Samuel designates and sets apart the place where God proved to be the Israelites' "help in ages past and hope for years to come." The Ebenezer is a lasting reminder of God's provision, an important symbol of hope among the Israelite people.

And so it is that we celebrate the victory the ancient Israelites enjoyed with the help of God when we sing "Here I raise mine Ebenezer." We join our spirit with theirs as we remember that ancient symbol of hope, that reminder of God's presence in their lives, that large stone placed in the midst of that vast, arid region, an unmistakable visible reminder that "but by the grace of God go they." A sign for generations that, against all odds, they survived because the Lord God was with them. I imagine that Ebenezer became a destination for Jewish pilgrims for generations. Can't you just picture it in your mind's eye, a caravan of families moving through the wilderness when one of the children hollers out, "Mommy. What's that big rock over there?" And they all pause to listen to the old, old story about God rescuing their ancestors from the hands of the Philistines.

I love the idea that for them hope was, in some ways, an actual thing—that big old rock in the desert, perhaps resembling one of the monoliths at Stonehenge. Hope was not just a nebulous spiritual concept or word printed on the page. I mean, I've mostly built my life on nebulous spiritual concepts and words printed on a page, I'm not opposed to nebulous spiritual concepts or words printed on a page, but gosh oh geez do I ever appreciate a concrete symbol of hope and a physical reminder, one I can see and feel, of God's presence in my life every now and again.

Perhaps the closest I come to it is this cross pendant I wear. When I'm distressed or confused I find myself grabbing for it and rubbing it between my fingers, an ever-present symbol of our ever-present God. While sometimes it's just a nervous habit, there are other times when just touching this cross brings to my mind's eye memories of times when "but by the grace of God went I." In being reminded of God's provision in the past, I am strengthened in the moment and given hope for the future knowing that because God was with me, God IS with me, and God WILL always be with me. I guess my cross is my Ebenezer—my symbol of hope, my reminder that God is at work in the world and in my life.

I'm grateful for it, this Ebenezer given to me by Jesse on our first Valentine's Day together, this physical thing that I can see and touch that is a symbol of a nebulous spiritual concept—hope—that I will never be able to fully articulate with my words or in my writing. And yet, I know how desperately I need hope. And, how desperately the world needs hope. We need these Ebenezers, these reminders that God is still at work in the world, these reminders that we can always hope in the Lord. No matter what we read in the paper or hear on the news . . . regardless of how painful our grief or burdensome our worry . . . no matter how far out of control we feel of our own lives or the lives of people we love so much it actually physically hurts when we can't help them . . . irrespective of our financial burdens or job stresses . . . we can hope because God is at work in our lives and the world.

On this first Sunday of Advent we celebrate the gift of hope, this ever-present nebulous spiritual concept symbolized by an Ebenezer for the ancient Israelites and symbolized for us here in the burning flame of a candle placed in our Advent wreath. This is a wreath of anticipation and preparation that marks the journey we take towards the manger, the journey to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome the Christ into our lives once again. That journey begins with hope.

This Sunday of hope is an invitation for all of us not just to remember the Ebenezer the ancient Israelites raised in the desert nearly 3000 years ago, it is also an opportunity for us to transform ourselves into living Ebenezers. The world needs us to BE the Ebenezer. Sure, we can sing and pray about hope—I can preach sermons about nebulous spiritual concepts and read to you words on the page—but they mean very little if we ourselves do not become unmistakable, visible reminders that God is, indeed, at work in the world—even here, even now. We have this incredible and awesome opportunity and responsibility to BE HOPE, to *Be the Ebenezer*—to show

that there is a Power at work in the world that are greater than fear, mightier than despair, and stronger than injustice.

And while it's likely not in the cards that we're going to win a mighty battle against our foes this Advent—we can win a battle against apathy by showing one of the least among us that we really do care. We can win a battle against oppression by reaching out to someone who is the victim of another's hatred. We can win a battle against the desecration of God's beautiful creation by refusing, reducing, reusing, or recycling. We can win a battle against the consumerism of the season by sitting back to count our blessings and recognizing that we don't have to get caught up in a flurry of spending because we already have enough. We can win a battle against fear by making the choice to put down our phone, shut off the TV, or close the paper—it's up to us to get away from all of that so we can re-realize that our hope is built—not on what the pundits say or the politicians promise or the pollsters report—but rather our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ, our righteousness.

It is in that realization, that reclamation of the truth that God is the ultimate authority, the ultimate guide, the ultimate guardian—just as much for us as for the ancient Israelites—with the hope born of that knowledge we can all be the Ebenezer, we can be the symbols of hope God uses in the world as reminders that God was, is, and always will be at work in the world and our hope IS built on nothing less than Jesus Christ our righteousness so let's get on out there and BE THE EBENEZERS! Thanks be to God.

Now, let's get back to the hymn . . . starting with the first line of the second verse.

Here I raise mine Ebenezer . . .