

“Hitherto and Henceforth”

*Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen.
He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the LORD helped us” (1 Samuel 7:12).*

There are times in life when it’s important for God’s people to reflect on what the Lord has done; to pause the frantic pace of our daily routine and tell our story; to give thanks for God’s promises and provision; to celebrate and rejoice; to turn our eyes to God and see our lives in the context of His greater story. Today is one of those times.

Today, as we gather around the Word of God, we will dedicate our new building addition and christen it with the name Ebenezer Hall. Over the last few weeks, I’ve watched people as they’ve heard this name for the first time and many seem to respond in a similar way. First, they slowly, politely nod their heads and then their eyebrows begin to bend in a little as they search for the significance of this unique name. You can almost see their minds working it through as they wonder why in world we would name our new building after a character from, “A Christmas Carol.” Well, I assure you the name Ebenezer has nothing to do with Scrooge or with Charles Dickens, but it does come from a *great story* and that story is found in today’s Old Testament lesson from 1 Samuel 7.

The background of the Ebenezer story is important to know. During this time in Israel’s history there was no king, there was no permanent temple and the presence of God was directly tied to the Ark of the Covenant. The Philistines were the constant enemy of Israel during this time and in 1 Samuel 4, because of the faithless leadership of Eli and his sons, the Israelites were routed in battle and the Philistines captured the Ark of the Lord. The loss of the Ark amounted to the loss of God’s presence for the people of Israel and it was a sign of God’s judgment. But shortly after they had captured the Ark, the Philistines began experiencing curses from the hand of God, so they decided to send the Ark back. They put the Ark on a cart and two milking cows pulled it back to Israel, where, we are told in the first verse of today’s text, it stayed in Kiriath Jearim for twenty years.

With the Ark of the Lord back in Israel, you would think that God’s people would rejoice and be glad, that this would be a time of celebration and thanksgiving, but that’s not what happened. You see at this time Israel was still worshipping false Gods. They had the Ark back in their possession but their hearts were still divided and they remained unrepentant. And this went on for twenty years! Finally, after wallowing in their sin and toiling under God’s judgment, repentance finally comes. Samuel instructs them to destroy their idols and return to the Lord with humility and sorrow. Samuel then called a special assembly of the people at Mizpah where he would “pray to the Lord” on behalf of the people (1 Samuel 7:5).

The entire nation gathered at Mizpah. They poured out water before the Lord as a sign of their repentance, they fasted and they cried out to God in confession of their sin (1 Samuel 7:6). It was great moment in the history of God’s people as they humbled themselves and returned to the Lord with all their hearts, but this spiritual highlight was not without a crisis. 1 Samuel 7:7 tells us that the Philistines heard about this gathering of the entire nation and they must have seen this as an opportune time to attack. The Philistines began to marshal their forces and when the people of Israel heard this, they were terrified. It was only twenty years earlier that they had lost a terrible battle and lost the Ark, and now – just when they were getting right with God – another attack comes.

So, desperately, faithfully they plead with Samuel, “Do not stop crying out to the Lord our God for us, that He may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines” (1 Samuel 7:8). After twenty years of relying on themselves and their idols, they finally got it! They knew that God was their only hope and they begged for Samuel to intercede for them and, in verse 9, we read that, “Samuel took a nursing lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. And Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him.” *And God’s deliverance was immediate, it was miraculous and it was complete!*

As Samuel was making the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But, we are told that the Lord thundered with a mighty sound against the Philistines and threw them into such panic and confusion that they were routed by Israel (1 Samuel 7:10-11). *God showed up!* God delivered His people. They cried out to the Lord, and He rescued them. He saved them; He protected them; He provided them with a stunning victory. And, to celebrate this great moment in their story, “Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen.” And he named it Ebenezer – a word which means “stone of help” – saying, “Thus far the Lord has helped us” (1 Samuel 7:2-14).

In the old King James translation, the word that stands out in Samuel’s laying of the Ebenezer monument is the word, “Hitherto.” This word, translated in our reading as “thus far” is a testament to God’s work among us and today, as we consider God’s role in *our* story, few words could better remind us of His faithfulness than this word, “Hitherto.” In the Litany of Thanks that we prayed earlier in the service, we took time to reflect on the story of God in this place; of the great heritage of provision and protection in our 145 year history, and time and again we were reminded that “hitherto – thus far – the Lord has helped us.” But it’s not only in the reflection of our history that we see God’s providing and helping hand. We also are richly blessed with vivid examples of God’s provision and protection in our day as well, and these examples have also become a part of God’s story in this place! From a congregational workshop in 2004 where we established accessibility as a priority for the future; to the formation of an Accessibility Task Force who challenged us to consider major changes to our building; to a group of leaders who looked more comprehensively at our mission and

saw the importance of our presence in this community and pushed us to think about the ministry of the Gospel in a bigger and broader way; in all of these things my brothers and sisters, “Hitherto – thus far – the Lord has helped us.”

And as a Building Committee began to meet and the Building Faith Campaign was launched and as God’s people spoke in one voice and stepped out together to Build Faith in the City, “Hitherto – thus far – the Lord has helped us.” And when, obstacles arose, and when delays came, and when numbers looked daunting...God delivered! And His deliverance was immediate, it was miraculous and it was complete! Today, we raise our voices in praise because *hitherto – thus far – the Lord has helped us...* but today is just the beginning!

You see the building we gather to dedicate and consecrate today is not merely a monument to the past, it is a proclamation of God’s promise and it is tool for ministry, and even as we mark this day with the words “Hitherto the Lord has helped us...” we also see in this refrain, a statement about the future – a statement about the, “Henceforth.” You see for the people of God, these two words must always go together: “Hitherto and Henceforth” – what has been and what will be! God has given us a great victory in this place and that is what we celebrate today, but the victory bestowed on us by the Lord has been given for a purpose and that purpose is in the henceforth! Today we gather at our own Mizpah to confess our doubts and unbelief, to humble ourselves before the Lord and to put our past and present and future squarely in His hands because in God’s story of days gone by, we also see promise for the days to come, and that promise is in Christ!

My friends, we have a message to share. It is a message of hope, it is a message of forgiveness, it is a message of life! *And this message is found solely in Jesus Christ.* In today’s epistle reading Peter describes Christ as our cornerstone, our stone of help, and then says, “Now to you who believe, this stone is precious” (1 Peter 2:7). This is why we have hitherto been blessed and this is why we exist henceforth: to proclaim Jesus Christ, crucified in our place and risen from the grave to redeem this world from sin and death and to freely give to all who believe in His name eternal life. On this Rock is our foundation and on this Rock we stand.

In the Ebenezer story from 1 Samuel, we find this henceforth purpose in a very special and profound way. You see, as the narrative concludes in verse 13 with a comment about Samuel’s leadership of God’s people, we are told that in the years that followed, “Israel delivered the neighboring territory from the power of the Philistines” (1 Samuel 7:14). *Don’t miss this!* The result of God’s gracious provision and miraculous victory was that the neighbors of God’s people were delivered from sin. I don’t want the meaning of this passage to be veiled in any way for us. We have been blessed by God to be a blessing to our neighbors! And today, as we consider the “Hitherto and Henceforth” we need to understand that our presence in the neighborhood is no accident and the mission field to which we have been called starts right outside our doors...and Ebenezer Hall reflects this very thing!

As our building committee met with David West in the early stages of his design process, we made it clear that, as a congregation, we have been called to be salt and light in this community. That part of our unique purpose as the body of Christ is to build faith in the city. In response to this, Mr. West designed a building with a visible connection to our neighborhood. Today, when you stand in Ebenezer Hall, look out the windows and you can’t help but feel tangibly connected to the community that surrounds our church. This building will serve as constant reminder to us that we are a light to the world and that the message of Gospel must go beyond our doors.

But the other inspiring and humbling reality of Ebenezer Hall is that just as we can see the community in which we have been placed, the community can also see us. Last Sunday night as I drove down Jackson Street toward the church, our second floor youth center was filled with kids and glowed like a beacon sending a vibrant light into a dark neighborhood. And Tuesday night as our confirmation families stood in Ebenezer Hall and gathered in a circle for prayer every car that drove by Emmanuel could see a visible expression of our faith. And in the stained glass windows designed by neighborhood artist William Lupkin, Ebenezer Hall silently bears brilliant witness to the presence of Christ in the means of grace in which our theology is so firmly grounded.

During the excavation process, as the earth was being removed and the foundation for Ebenezer Hall was being laid, Sam and his crew hit something substantial, something that stopped their digging cold. Throughout the early stages of the project, there was a constant concern that the ground would be hiding some concealed barrier that would jeopardize the project, and so as the claws of the excavation equipment suddenly stopped, anxiety quickly rose. Upon further examination, the obstacle beneath the soil turned out to be a very large red-colored stone. Believe it or not, it was discovered in the general vicinity of the dedication plaque that graces the entrance to the new building. That red stone now sits just outside the entrance of Ebenezer Hall and today, as we dedicate this building to the glory of God, this is our Ebenezer. This is our stone of help. It is for us a bold and unmistakable reminder that in Jesus Christ, thus far the Lord has helped us.

Hitherto and henceforth, our story is covered in the blood of Christ and our mission to make disciples is the reason we exist. May God grant us His Holy Spirit and use us to proclaim the Gospel of Christ for the salvation of the world, hitherto, henceforth and even forevermore. Amen.

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