

Here I Raise My Ebenezer
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; I Samuel 7:12
November 18, 2007

What do you think of when you hear the word Ebenezer? Scrooge. Ebenezer Scrooge is the main character of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

In a few moments we will sing a song that has the word "Ebenezer" in the second verse. Many of us have sung that song without ever knowing what an Ebenezer is! *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* was written by Robert Robinson. He was sent to London, England at the age of 14 in 1749 to learn how to be a barber. In London, he joined the 18th century equivalent to the Crips street gang and for three years he raised trouble. When he was 17 years old, he went to hear a Methodist preacher named George Whitfield preach. Robert went to worship intent on making fun of those Methodists, but instead he was converted and became a follower of Jesus. Several years after that experience he felt God calling him to preach and became a preacher in the Methodist church. He wrote the song, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, when he was twenty-three. The second verse begins with the words, "Here I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thine help I'm come."

So now what is an Ebenezer? Webster's abridged dictionary doesn't list the word with a definition. It is found in one place in the Bible, in the verse we heard from I Samuel. At the time the Israelites were feeling threatened by their enemies. The prophet Samuel prayed to the Lord on behalf of his people, asking God to protect them. The Bible tells us that the enemies were confused and the Israelite people were victorious. As a witness to God's faithfulness, Samuel built a monument of stone, which he called Ebenezer, which means "stone of help." In the King James translation of the Bible, Samuel said, "Hitherto the Lord has helped us."

An Ebenezer is a "stone of help." It is a reminder of God's real, holy presence and help in our lives.

The season of Thanksgiving is an appropriate time for us to construct our own Ebenezers. We can remember the significant ways and moments in our own lives when we have experienced God's presence. Perhaps it is been at times of crisis when life was in turmoil and God provided the help we needed to get through. God's presence often comes to us in the form of family members and friends who are a source of strength for us. We have chosen to be a part of a church because we discover God's presence in our worship, prayer, study, and fellowship with God's family.

Today in a spirit of thanksgiving, I want to raise my Ebenezer as a sign of God's faithfulness in my life.

A major stone of help that God has given me is my husband, Mark. When we were in college, Mark was pursued me but I tried to convince him that he really didn't want to be a pastor's husband. He, however, felt that it was his calling. His youth director at his home church was a female seminarian who was called to be a priest, but her denomination was not fully ready to accept women in ordained ministry. Mark shared in her struggles, which later inspired him to be a source of support to me as I embarked upon ministry. Even after 25 years of marriage and ministry, he continues to be my greatest fan - and honest critic! Although he doesn't host tea for the United Methodist Women nor play piano for Sunday school, he does participate in ministry in countless ways behind the scenes. He took on the non-traditional role of at-home dad so that my ministry would continue while Jeff was young. In Mark I have experienced the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ.

Another major stone of help given me by God is my son, Jeff. Since he was a newborn in my arms, together we have prayed for members of our church families. His insights have shown God to me in ways I would otherwise have missed. Jeff's gift of helpfulness has been an asset many times. More recently he has critiqued some sermons before they are preached and offered very constructive criticism. Through Jeff I have known the joy of life.

My family of origin has been a foundational stone of help in my life. My parents provided a stable, healthy, active family life. They introduced me to the community of faith from my beginnings and played active roles in the church, providing a model of service and discipleship for me. Since entering ordained ministry my family has been a source of strength and encouragement, and oftentimes practical help. My first week in ministry 21 years ago, I needed a black robe for a Samoan funeral. I didn't own one and didn't really want to buy one, thinking I would never wear it again. My mom was the secretary for a municipal judge. She got one of his old black robes, shortened it, and sent it to me in time to wear for the funeral!

I place a stone of help called mentors. I have had many mentors in my life. Many have been older pastors who have shepherded and guided me. Sometime lay leaders in the churches I've served have been those who have taught me about leadership and challenged me to deeper spiritual growth. The most significant mentor who started me on my journey in ordained ministry was my pastor when I was in high school. Don saw my gifts for ministry before I did. Quietly he gave me opportunities to serve in the local church and in the annual conference. He and his wife were alums of the University of the Pacific. They introduced me to the university, taking me to visit the campus for the first time, convincing me that it was where I wanted to attend. In that same visit in 1976, we came to Pleasanton for a Heifer Project Roundup at the fairgrounds. We stayed overnight at Rossmoor

with their relative. Little did I know that thirty years later I would be living next to Rossmoor, nor that I would be going back to Pacific not as a student, but as a regent. My mentor and pastor, Don, opened the door to many opportunities that would continue to reap rewards as the years go on.

Another stone of help is labeled small groups. I have been part of several small groups over the years. Many have been groups of church members gathered for spiritual growth or study or prayer. Several have been groups of colleagues who shared in worship, learning, and support. Other groups have been in retreat settings where we have often shared an intense experience of God's presence among us. I have found these small groups to be the venues in which my beliefs have been challenged, my faith grown, and my discipleship held accountable. I am grateful for the many small groups I've been a part of over the years, from Disciple Bible study to covenant groups to prayer groups to Bible studies. The members of these groups have been sources of support and growth to me.

A large stone of help is named churches. Over my lifetime I have participated in nine local churches, early on as a member and then as pastor. Each has been United Methodist with many similarities, but each has been unique with its own character and rich identity. Some have nudged me deeper into social justice issues. Each has challenged me to grow in leadership, oftentimes through experiences of deep change and even conflict. All have given me friends in the faith with whom I am still in relationship. I am grateful for the many gifts I have received from each setting.

A final stone in my Ebenezer is friends and extended family. Throughout the seasons of my life, I have been blessed to have a network of support in my extended family. While we seem to see one another less frequently than in my childhood, aunts, uncles, and cousins have continued to be an anchor for me in difficult times and a firm foundation of love. I've been blessed with friends to lean on, with whom I could laugh and cry, friends who provide safe harbors for me to share my deepest fears and hurts. Friends and family have been instruments of God's healing and life-giving presence in my life.

This is my Ebenezer, my monument to God's faithfulness in my life. What does your Ebenezer look like? Where have you experienced God's activity in your life? How has God blessed you? When has God helped you? What struggles has God seen you through? The insert in your program provides a place for you to raise your Ebenezer, to witness to God's presence in your life. In this week of Thanksgiving, I invite you to take a few reflective moments to raise your own Ebenezer to remember and celebrate God's help.