

July 23 – Here I Raise My Ebenezer

Scripture: Genesis 28: 10-19a

Growing up one of the favorite hymns of my father was, “Come Thou Found of Every Blessing” and so we sang it often in his churches. The second verse starts, “Here I raise mine Ebenezer.” I always wondered what that meant and why we were singing about it. It wasn’t until seminary and a course in Old Testament history that I got an answer. Ebenezer comes from the Hebrew and means: Stone of Help or Memory. Often in the Bible a stone is used as a memorial of some momentous event in a person or the nation’s life. We hear of it in I Samuel 7:12. The Israelites were hard pressed by the Philistines. The people cried out to Samuel, the prophet, asking him to beseech God to save them. Samuel offered up a burnt offering, the Lord answered. He thundered with a mighty voice that threw the Philistines into confusion and they were routed before Israel. And then in verse 12: “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah and named it Ebenezer for he said “Thus far the Lord has helped us.””

Frequently in the Bible a stone or stones are raised in praise and thanks to God. They are done as an acknowledgement of God’s presence and help at a time of great need or time of great change. Today we have Jacob setting up this memorial stone. We have already mentioned Samuel raising a stone called Ebenezer. We have the people of Israel taking 12 stones, one for each tribe, out of the river Jordan when they cross to create a memorial. This is at the time when they are entering the Promised Land. All of these stones were to be seen so people would remember God is with them and at work for them.

Let’s get to Jacob. He was in desperate straits. He was fleeing from the wrath of his brother, brought on by his cunning and deceit. You may have forgotten what happened. Esau was the older brother by a few seconds. In that culture that was huge. He was the first born and would receive the majority of their father’s estate. One day Esau is starving after going out hunting. Jacob had made some lentil stew. He tells Esau he can have as much as he wants if he gives him his birthright. Esau just thinking about his growling stomach agrees. Jacob realizes that a promise made is easily broken so, as their father ages, he schemes with his mother, who loved him more than

his brother, to assure his new rights. The formal transfer of property happened in the patriarchal blessing. Esau is again out hunting and Jacob dresses in his clothes, put sheep wool on his arms and neck, for Esau was a hairy one, and goes in pretending to be his brother and received the blessing from their sick, blind and dying father Isaac. Esau, upon returning and learning of this, threatens to kill Jacob and so he flees home. He is spending the night unprotected, with a stone for a pillow as he journeys back towards the home of his ancestor Abraham, hoping to find shelter. He has a dream about a ladder ascending to heaven. He hears from God that God is with him and will bless him. He sets up the stone before moving on. He still doesn't know what his future holds but he moves forward with more assurance because he knows he is with God.

When I read this story I find reassurance. For one, it tells me that, when I am struggling, God is still with me. I may not see God or feel God's presence but I am not alone. Even if the struggles are brought on by my poor choices I am not absent from God. Have you ever had those moments when you were like Jacob? You are haunted by the past and the future is uncertain. You wish you could undo some of the choices you made or you want answers to what the future will look like. This is a pretty scary place to be. You feel isolated, exposed and so very alone. Just like Jacob we need to be reminded that God is with us. Jacob experienced the presence of God through a dream. In being reminded that God was with him, all of a sudden the future did not look so scary.

I remember talking to a university student while I was pastor in Moscow. He had grown up in a small Idaho town in the southern part of the state. He had let everyone know for the last years of his high school that he couldn't wait to get out of town. With joy he enrolled in the university. Now, Moscow is not a big town but when you come from a community of less than five hundred, with one grocery store that was also the hardware store and gas station, it felt huge. He was overwhelmed and feeling very much alone. He wasn't sure he wanted to stay but he couldn't give up and go home to the ranch. That just wasn't who he was. He was very afraid. He shared a bit with his mother and she said, "Go talk to the Methodist pastor." That was how he ended up in my office. I didn't have answers to all of his questions or fears. What I did say is, "You

are not alone. We will be there for you. I hooked him up with the campus ministry and in a few months the homesickness went away, the present was fun, and the future seemed exciting. Later he thanked me for reminding him that he wasn't alone. He had forgotten that God is with us when we struggle.

The other thing the Jacob story tells me is that even the most mundane place can be holy because God is present. Who would have thought an isolated spot in the dessert with only a rock for a pillow would be a holy place of God. Yet that is what happened. I often find God mightily present in the most uninspiring places. Yes, I feel the holy when I walk into a great church. But I have found it just as much in cleaning the mud out of a person's home after it was flooded, or greeting people who come to our community dinner, or sitting with friends telling stories. Any place can and should be seen as holy, for God is always present. So when we are feeling alone, lost and scared this is a reminder for us to be quiet, be open and see how God is manifest in that place. For the young man I was talking about, just hearing a reminder that he was not alone was what it took.

I think we are also called to raise our own stones of Ebenezer. We need to raise our markers of remembrance when we experience God or received God's help. These mental markers keep us grounded when life is challenging. They are something to look back at and remember how we vitally felt God's presence. Sometimes we need an actual reminder. One year, when I was at camp, we had the children take a stone home to help them remember the week they had just experienced and what they had learned. Every time they saw it they were to remember. I saw one of those campers several years later. He still had the stone on his desk. I know a woman who puts little notes and such in her Bible. Every time she sees them she remembers why they were important.

The people of Israel know that there would be scary times and times when they would forget that God was surrounding them and so they raised up stones of remembrance. We need to do so as well.

Jacob was able to leave that place and move forward with hope and purpose. He had no idea what lay before him. He would make it to the home of his mother's

relatives. He would ultimately marry, have children and become wealthy. He would return past this place and be reconciled with his brother. The best parts of his life lay before him, he just didn't know it. His ancestors would sometimes walk by that stone and remember.

In being reminded of how God has been with us in the past, we are able to face the future. I remember visiting with a woman who was needing to move because of health issues. This was not something she wanted to do but needed to do. As I visited with her the day before her niece came to pick her up and take her to her new home in an assisted living facility in a different community nearer family, she started talking. She didn't realize it but she was showing me her Ebenezers, stones of remembrance. She talked about several major life transitions she had gone through. In each of them she recalled how God had been with her. Finally she looked at me and said, "I know God is in this."

God doesn't rescue us from our poor choices. God doesn't promise that we won't be in some scary and lonely spots. What God does promise is to be present with us, just as he was present with Jacob. We need to look for and be open to that presence. We need to remember how God has been faithfully with us in the past. In so doing we will be able to walk forward into whatever future life presents us, knowing God is with us. This will give us hope and reassurance.