Here I Raise My Ebenezer (Wait … *What?*)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 11, 2026
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Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines" … Then [he] said, "Gather at Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." So, they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the Lord. They fasted that day, and said, "We have sinned against the Lord." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it, they were afraid of the Philistines. The people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines."

So, Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord; Samuel cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him. As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but the Lord thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel … Then Samuel took a stone and set it up … and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us."
(I Samuel 7:3-12, NRSVue)

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We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? …

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 8:28-39, NRSVue)

I'm as modern a Christian as the next person, but I have always loved *old hymns*. I love their sometimes-strange words and old cadences, the sense that when we sing them, we're entering a river of faith that was flowing long before we arrived and will *keep* flowing long after we're gone. And few old hymns are quite as moving as "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," written about 1758 by the English barber-turned-Baptist pastor Robert Robinson (1735-1790). We will be singing it together after this sermon. For me, there's something almost irresistible about it:

> *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 God's unchanging love!*

There's one simple prayer in those lines that I especially love: *Tune my heart to sing thy grace*. As though the heart were an *instrument*, capable of resonance and beauty, but also capable of slipping out of tune. As though somewhere beneath all the noise of our lives there was a truer music, and grace could bring us back into it.

And then we come to the second verse, which starts off with one of the more obscure lines to ever find its way into Christian hymnbooks: *"Here I raise my Ebenezer; hither by Thy help I'm come."* Some exalted language, sure, but what in heaven's name is an *Ebenezer*?! We've all heard of Ebenezer *Scrooge*, of course, but what could that old miser possibly have to do with a hymn about the grace of God? Well, *nothing*, as it turns out! And yet generations of Christians have been singing that line with great conviction, many without the foggiest idea of what they mean. The answer takes us back to the story we heard this morning, into one of those turbulent stretches of First Samuel where Israel is trying, usually rather badly, to learn what it means to belong to God.

These are unsettled years. Israel has no king. The Philistines are a constant threat. The people keep reaching for whatever seems capable of giving them security, including the gods of the peoples around them. Samuel sees that their *deepest* trouble runs *underneath* the military crisis: their hearts have become divided. So, he says to them, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord." There's that *heart* again – the heart that needs tuning, the heart that wanders, the heart that must be turned again toward its true center.

The people gather at Mizpah. They confess. They fast. They turn themselves again toward God. And when the Philistines hear that Israel has gathered, they move against them, and suddenly the people who have come together in repentance find themselves afraid for their lives. Samuel cries out to God. The story says that the Lord thunders against the Philistines, throwing them into confusion, and Israel survives the day. Afterward Samuel takes a stone and sets it upright

between Mizpah and Shen. He calls the stone *Ebenezer* – *eben ha-ezer* in Hebrew, the "stone of help" – and gives it this explanation: "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

Those two words may be the most important words in the story. *Thus far.* There's something remarkably restrained about them. Samuel has lived too long and seen too much to pretend that Israel has reached some safe and settled place. More trouble *will* come. More failures *will* come. Israel's future stretches beyond Samuel's sight, as uncertain as any human future always is. So, he doesn't claim too much. He raises a stone and tells the truth he knows: here we were afraid, here we cried out, here help came, here we discovered that we had not been abandoned. And so, *remember* this place. Remember what happened here. Remember how far grace has already brought you.

That's what an *Ebenezer* is. It's *memory given weight*. A stone placed in the landscape so that years later, when the people pass that way again, someone will ask, "Why is that there?" and someone else will tell the story. Because we human beings forget. Yesterday's grace can become almost invisible beneath today's anxiety. The mercy that sustained us through one season does not prevent us from trembling in the next one.

So, we need our Ebenezers, though most these days, of course, are not stones. They may be photos, letters, books, simple objects that would look perfectly ordinary to anyone else. They may be places fixed forever in the geography of the heart: a hospital room, a kitchen table, a church sanctuary, a roadside somewhere, a house we once lived in, a graveside where the world seemed suddenly emptied out. Sometimes the Ebenezer is a person whose face has become inseparable from our memory of grace – someone who came when we were sinking, someone who spoke the truth when we had lost our bearings, someone who loved us when our own hearts had grown weary.

And sometimes the strangest thing happens. Years later we discover that the places we remember most gratefully are tangled up with some of the hardest passages of our lives. First Samuel itself knows something about that. The name "Ebenezer" has already appeared before we reach this morning's story. Several chapters earlier, Israel camped at a place called Ebenezer before going out against the Philistines, and that battle ended catastrophically. Israel was defeated. The Ark of the Covenant was captured. Eli's sons were killed. When Eli heard what had happened, he fell backward from his seat and died.

So, by the time Samuel takes up his stone in chapter seven and gives it that name, "Ebenezer" already carries shadows. The name has known defeat before it becomes a song of gratitude. But then, that's why this old story has more to say to us than the simple assurance that God will always make things turn out the way we hope. Some of our deepest Ebenezers stand beside roads we would never willingly travel again. They mark seasons when something broke, when someone died, when a future we had imagined disappeared.

We would never call the wound good. We would never pretend the loss was secretly a blessing in disguise. Yet years later, we may discover that grace was present even there – in the hands

that held us, in courage we didn't know we possessed, in love that came toward us through other people, in the bare fact that after a night we thought would never end, morning came.

The stone, then, doesn't always say, "Nothing terrible happened here." It says, "Somehow, God met us here." Thus far the Lord has helped us. And yet, even the most enduring memorial has its limits. It may stand for generations, bearing witness to what happened there, while the hearts of those who pass by it grow distracted, fearful, or forgetful. It remains where it was raised, but the human heart can wander a very long way from a truth it once knew with perfect clarity.

Robert Robinson seems to have understood this wonderfully well. Almost as soon as he sings of raising his stone of help and memory, he turns toward the uneasy business of keeping faith with the God whose faithfulness he has just celebrated:

> *O to grace how great a debtor*
> *Daily I'm constrained to be;*
> *Let that grace now, like a fetter,*
> *Bind my wandering heart to Thee.*
> *Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,*
> *Prone to leave the God I love.*
> *Here's my heart, oh take and seal it,*
> *Seal it for Thy courts above.*

What an unguarded confession! Robinson has just *remembered* the grace that brought him this far, and now he finds himself pleading for the grace that will sustain him in all the days still to come. He knows how easily the heart can drift away even from what it most deeply loves. And so, he offers it back to God, asking that the very grace he has remembered might bind him more securely to the One who has never ceased to love him.

And that's another reason I love this hymn. It *knows* us … it knows *me*. It doesn't imagine faith as one long upward climb into ever greater certainty. It understands the uneven terrain of an actual human soul, how even the deepest love of God can coexist with fear and faltering trust. And the Apostle Paul knows that terrain too. He knows what happens to faith when the weight of living becomes more than we can bear.

Romans 8 is one of the great soaring chapters of Scripture, but its confidence rises out of a landscape filled with *groaning*. Creation groans, Paul says. We ourselves groan. Even the Spirit of God intercedes within us with sighs too deep for words. Paul knows suffering too well to romanticize it. He names hardship and distress, persecution and famine, danger and death. When he says that "all things work together for good," he is speaking from inside a creation that is still *aching* for redemption. He has no interest in telling grieving people that whatever happened was somehow good after all.

His confidence lies somewhere deeper. Grace is not helpless before what is broken. God can enter what is fractured and begin *there*. God can take lives marked by fear and grief and failure and still draw them toward the likeness of Christ. Even the places where language gives out entirely, where all we have left are those sighs too deep for words, remain places where the Spirit is already praying within us.

Then Paul reaches the great crescendo: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" You can almost feel him testing the strength of that love against everything that frightens us – hardship, distress, persecution, hunger, danger, death itself, life with all its bewildering possibilities, the powers we can see and those we cannot, everything already happening and everything still waiting somewhere beyond the horizon. Height, depth, anything in all creation. And Paul comes back with the same answer every time: *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's the gospel, here, standing before the Ebenezers of our lives. Our hope cannot finally depend upon the steadiness of our own remembering, because we forget too much. Our hearts wander too easily. We lose the tune. Our hope rests in a faithfulness deeper than our own: the God from whom we wander does not wander away from us. The God we sometimes forget continues to remember us. Even when our own faith becomes a thin and trembling thing, the love of God does not become thin and trembling with it.

We know there are seasons when faith may amount to little more than allowing ourselves to be carried by a promise we don't presently feel. Romans gives us that promise. We are held within a love larger than our fear, deeper than our grief, stronger than everything that threatens to undo us. We are held within a love that has already entered death and come out the other side.

That's what our Ebenezers finally help us remember. We look backward because sometimes the future is too obscure to read. We gather the stones of memory – the people, the places, the graces, the mercies – and we discern a pattern we couldn't see while we were living through it. Here, too, there was help. And *here* … and *even here*. Not always rescue in the form we wanted. Sometimes simply presence. Sometimes strength enough for one more day. Sometimes a door we couldn't see until we were standing before it. Sometimes another human being who became, for a little while, the very face of God.

And so, still we raise these "stones of help" … "Thus far the Lord has helped us." There is humility in those words, and gratitude, and just enough courage for the road ahead. Thus far there has been mercy. Thus far grace has found us, sometimes in forms we recognized immediately and sometimes only years afterward. Thus far we have wandered and been found, fallen and been lifted, grieved and somehow learned to sing again.

So, come, Thou Fount of every blessing, tune our hearts to sing Thy grace! Tune these hearts again to the mercies we have forgotten, to the grace hidden along the road behind us, to the love from which neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation can ever separate us – to the glory of God! Amen.