

Augusta First Baptist Church
1 Samuel 7:7-14
“What Exactly is an Ebenezer Anyway?”
October 8, 2006

NRS 1 Samuel 7:7 *“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. 8 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.” 9 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. 10 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. 11 And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car. 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.” 13 So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel; the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. 14 The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.”*

I read somewhere recently that Biblical names are popular again. We probably all know someone named Mary or Jacob or Aaron. I suppose some people choose to give their children a Biblical name because it sounds cool. Who, after all, wouldn't want to name their child Adonijah or Jezebel. Okay, maybe those names are not that popular.

Most of the names we read about in the Bible have a meaning behind it. Jacob, for example, means “trickster.” The name Moses means “to draw out.” I never met someone named Ichabod. I read about Ichabod Crane as a child, but never met someone named Ichabod. That name means “inglorious.” How would you like it if your mother hung you with that one?

I have never personally met anyone named Ebenezer either. We all remember Ebenezer Scrooge from “The Christmas Carol.” And you have probably encountered a few churches named Ebenezer. Maybe you remember the line from the old hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” The second line in the hymn goes like this:

Here I raise mine Ebenezer;
Hither by thy help I'm come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

I remember as a kid thinking, “What is an Ebenezer anyway, and why should I want to raise it?” The name Ebenezer has a tremendous meaning, but before I tell you let me share with you a story in the Bible that speaks of Ebenezer. The story comes from the Old Testament book 1

Samuel.

Now I recognize that many of us are intimidated by the Old Testament, so let me set the story up. Israel, the children of God, had finally arrived in the Promised Land. But just because they made it home, doesn't mean that everything was well and care-free for them. In fact they were plagued with enemies. Have you ever had moments where you felt like the closer you were getting to God, the greater your hardships? That is Israel. In fact, as long as we are talking about names, the name Israel means "to strive with God and prevail."

Anyway, Israel, the children of God, were in the Promised Land and they were being bullied all around by their neighbors, especially the Philistines. They were a violent conquering people, destroying entire empires along their way. Well, the people of God were in their way. And Israel was terrified.

Some might say that Israel had it coming to them, because they were not behaving like God's children. They were suffering a form of spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder. They wanted security to the point of distraction. They wanted prosperity and more and better to the point of distraction. And with all these distractions *they compromised who they were*.

Actually, that is not so difficult to believe. There have been times when I have found myself distracted by my anxieties and fears, my doubts and struggles. There are things I want, like security and comfort, prosperity and well-being. Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder – getting distracted by all the other "stuff" in life.

In chapter 4 of 1 Samuel Israel thought that if they could take with them a holy object to war they would be assured of victory. They chose to take with them the Ark of the Covenant. This was a chest of sorts overlaid with gold. It contained sacred objects from their history: a tablet of the Ten Commandments; a jar of manna; and the rod or staff of Aaron. They take this ark, this chest with them into battle as a sort of amulet or totem or good luck object. They felt confident that they could defeat the Philistines. They were wrong. Instead they were routed, decimated and humiliated by the Philistines.

Of course, we tend to do the same thing today with God-talk, and preening piety. Sometimes we think that if we just say all the right things like, "God's will" and "part of His plan, His purpose," if we look pretty in church, and mark our Bibles in all the right places we can pretend we have control over a situation, when, in fact, we do not. Indeed, it turns out that the Philistines take control by capturing the ark for themselves, but that is another story for another day.

Okay, here is where we get to Ebenezer. As I said, the children of God are thoroughly defeated – physically and spiritually – but they are ready to listen. Of course, I need to make the observation that one is often ready to listen when all the other sources of confidence are proven bankrupt. I am not suggesting that God causes all our defeats, but we are oftentimes more prone to listen to God when the other distractions are gone. And when we are ready to listen I believe that God has a number of ways the message gets across. It could come from another person, a

passage of scripture, an angel or in the case of this story here, a prophet. The prophet's name is Samuel and he addresses Israel and says "If you are truly serious about coming back to God, clean house." [1 Samuel 7:3, *The Message*]

Specifically, Samuel goes on to explain that Israel was to remove the foreign gods and Astartes from among them. Let me explain a couple of things here that help shed some meaning on this story. Baal was one of the many gods worshiped by the Canaanites. Baal was the storm god and chief god related to fertility of the land. Fertility and productivity was paramount for agricultural people. The Astarte was a Canaanite goddess of fertility and war. The significance of this will be important in a moment.

Israel had compromised their loyalty not simply because they were fickle in their beliefs but desperate for survival. War, survival, economic success, and productivity in the land was and continues to be significant issues. No more games, no more God-talk, no more magical thinking, no more substitutes, no more distractions— just sincerity, authenticity, and be real. They gathered for battle – the Philistines were planning to conquer them for good – and Israel was still terrified. "...*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.*"

The text reads LORD "***thundered*** with a great ***thunder***" and the Philistines were routed by Israel. The Canaanite god known as a storm god was silenced by the ***thunder*** of the LORD... *YHWH!*

...*12 Then Samuel took a stone and set it up ... and named it Ebenezer; for he said, "Thus far the LORD has helped us."* (1 Samuel 7:10,12)

Ebenezer: *Thus far the LORD has helped us.* The symbolism was that Israel would see that stone and remember just how far God had taken them.

We all have those Ebenezer moments. A couple of years ago on Christmas day we visited my family late that afternoon. My daddy came in from the afternoon milking and with barn clothes damp and dirty he handed me a rock, just as damp and dirty and said "Here, this is yours. You helped work for it." Back in the 70s when I was a child the dairy industry hit rock bottom. For a long time farmers including ourselves were making next to nothing for their milk. My family had to mortgage the farm that had been in the family for several generations just to make ends meet. That year just a week before Christmas my daddy paid the place off. Every rock he said now belongs to us. So he handed me a rock. He might as well have named it Ebenezer. *This is how far the Lord has taken you.*

Can you name the places where God has sustained you, taken you? This church has a cornerstone – several actually – that mark the Ebenezer moments: 1820, 1902, 1983. Can you mark the significant and life-altering boundaries in your life? They may come in the form of degrees and diplomas, but just as likely you can find them in a photo album filled with pictures of friends, family and places. Ebenezer moments are not always places of success. For some it is by the graveside of someone loved and cherished. These are places God held you up when your

own distractions or will-power failed.

Verse 12 is a great claim: ***God Did This!*** Thus far the Lord has helped us. Ebenezer! And if God has been faithful in our past, can we not also expect God's help in our future?

But this future is by no means automatic. God did not just "bail" Israel out when they got themselves into a bind. It came out of moving beyond false security and into an authentic trust. Israel trusted in might and in culture and in a reconfigured, manipulated religion. Their faith was misplaced and misspent. The Philistines represented for Israel their fears: the Philistines were a formidable military foe and technically advanced. They had already defeated Israel on two other occasions. False security is ultimately idolatry.

We may well expect Ebenezer moments for our future, but not because God is bound to do this. They come when we remember who actually holds our peace. We too, like the nations of old, dwell among people who worship and idolize political power, economic might, and technological dominance.

I confess to you that it is most difficult to trust in God alone. We are preoccupied with success, safety and security as our idols or preferred gods of worship. We drive hard to be successful as individuals and for our families to appear successful. We shape our careers to be a success.

Now, of course there is nothing wrong with these things itself. Success, safety, and security are basically neutral in value. Yet, when they become divine substitutes, we will find ourselves in idolatrous waters. There can be little hope for Ebenezer moments when all we do is believe *in* God but we no longer believe God.

Ebenezer is a call to reflect – look how far the Lord has taken us. I suggest to you that our lives are marked in Ebenezer moments where God has stood by us and for us when the odds appeared overwhelming.

Ebenezer is also a reminder to look ahead: ***This is where God can take us!*** Where do you think God is taking you today with your life; with your family? Where do you think God is taking this church in this region and in this world? Are there any limits?

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Israel had compromised their loyalty not simply because they were fickle in their beliefs but desperate for survival. War, survival, economic success, and productivity in the land was and continues to be significant issues.

Israel responds to Samuel's exhortation, and at least for now, dispenses of the gods of Baal and Astarte. We read that as both sides were drawing out for battle the LORD "*thundered* with a great *thunder*" and the Philistines were routed by Israel. The Canaanite god known as a storm god was silenced by the *thunder* of the LORD...*YHWH!*