

SERMON JANUARY 28, 2024
[1 Samuel 7:7-12; Psalm 111; Romans 12:9-21; John 17:20-26]
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Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength, our courage and our freedom. Amen

The hymn we just sang, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”, is one of my favorites. I have sung this hymn since I was a “wee lad”, as Bev Babson would say. But the version we sang this morning is **not** the one I sang. In the **original** version, verse 2 begins, “Here I *raise my Ebenezer*”, not “Here I find my greatest treasure”. I love to sing the original version, “Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by thy help I’m come”, **because** it confesses my *own* faith in the **faithfulness** of God to help me on my way.

Now, some of you may be wondering, “What is an **Ebenezer**? What does it mean to *raise* an Ebenezer? Well, it has *nothing* to do with **Ebenezer Scrooge**! The answer is in our Old Testament lesson, 1 Samuel 7:12: “Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah (**yesh-a-na**), and named it Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us’.” The Hebrew word Ebenezer translates literally as “stone of help”. On behalf of the people of God, Samuel set up a stone, a “stone of memory”, if you will, to commemorate the help God had given them to defeat the Philistines.

There are **other** Old Testament examples of setting up such a “stone of memory”: think of **Jacob**, who wrestled with an angel and then set up his stone pillow to mark the spot as Bethel, “the house of God.” Or, think of **Joshua** setting up a cairn of 12 stones after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. To be the **faithful** people of God is **to remember**—to recall how God has helped. Let’s not forget that: to be the faithful people of God is to **remember**.

Now, an Ebenezer stone implies a looking back to recall the many ways God has helped God’s people to reach a *new place*: “Hither **by thy help** we’ve come”. It means taking time to **rehearse** the many ways God has showed the way to go—to **remember** all those “coincidences” which are later recognized to be, in reality, **signs** that the Spirit of God has been at work all along the way.

I have been your Senior Warden now for the past two years and **I believe today**, January 28, 2024, this day of our Annual Meeting, is the **right time** for us to raise **our own Ebenezer**—to recall how God has helped us during these past two years. There are *so many ways*, but I will only recount a few. (1) The loving ministry of our beloved interim priest, **Canon Joan Anthony**. You *know* what a healing and nourishing presence she has been among us. She not only helped us navigate Covid, which was **our** “wilderness experience”, but she helped prepare us to arrive where we are today. **“Hither by God’s help we’ve come.”** (2) The **Healing Circle** we experienced on May 10, 2022, which was the result of Canon Joan listening to the Spirit. In that healing circle, which was facilitated by Bishop Melissa Skelton and Deacon Eric Stroo, many of us **found healing** from traumas of the past and became **more nearly one**. **“Hither by God’s help we’ve come.”** (3) The long process of searching for a new Rector. What strikes me about that process, and is something I want us to **remember**, is this: the Holy Spirit was working toward *mutual confirmation* of God’s choice for us--guiding the *Profile Committee* to produce a description of **who we are**, prompting **Rev. Jenny** to respond to that description and apply to be our Rector, and overshadowing the **Search Committee** to call Rev. Jenny to be our new Rector. Do you see what I am saying? The Holy Spirit was working on both ends of the relationship, so to speak. **“Hither by God’s help we’ve come.”** (4) An **unexpected** opportunity to bring on board Henry Lebedinsky as our new Missioner for Music! We **did** have an **unannounced** opening for a parish musician; but Henry only learned of it by chance, or **was it chance?** And we did not know that Henry was looking for a change in his ministry. (And even when the possibility presented itself, I said to Teresa, “I don’t see **how** this can **happen!**” O, me of little faith!) Again, the Holy Spirit was working on **all of us** to **mutually confirm** God’s choice for us. **“Hither by God’s help we’ve come.”** (5) Finally, I recall for us the **record-breaking stewardship campaign** we have just completed. This is one way God is reminding us of the **abundance** we have been given. **“Hither by God’s help we’ve come.”**

I could go on recalling other ways God has helped us, but, *is it not clear* that the Spirit has been abundantly at work among us? **Again** I say, we **need** to raise *our own* Ebenezer to **commemorate** the countless ways God has helped us to reach **this glad day** in our life together!

Now, I submit to you that raising an Ebenezer also marks a **threshold**, a new point of departure. The people of God look to their future with **confidence** that God will **continue** to help them. **Standing** on the threshold, **recalling** God's help in the past, the people of God **determine anew to trust** God for their future together—to listen intently for the voice of the Spirit as they journey on.

It must be as abundantly clear to you, as it is to me, that St. Augustine's in-the-Woods is now on the threshold of something **new**, that **new ways of being** are being birthed, that our future promises to be full of **wonders** still to be realized. As I said at the Celebration of New and Mutual Ministry last February, "**Do we dare to believe it?!**"

So, **what does** our future hold for us? **Who can say?!** What would **you** have said about our future just *two short years ago*? Before the healing ministry of Canon Joan, or before the advent of Rev. Jenny and Henry, or before our amazing 2024 stewardship campaign? We really had **no idea** what **wonderful** ways God would help us on our way.

I happily confess that I don't know either! But here is what I **do** know: (1) You, the people of St. Augustine's, have been **faithful in the past** to heed the promptings of the Spirit. You heeded God's call to **lay the foundations** of God's house in this place. You have been faithful to **keep this spiritual community alive** down through the years. We have been faithful to **call new leadership** to St. Augustine's—to join with Rev. Jenny and Henry in **mutual ministry** to each other, to our **community**, and to the **world**. If we have been faithful in the past, we can be faithful to listen to the Spirit for our future together. (2) We are blessed with an **astounding abundance of wealth** in this place—not just dollars, but also an abundance of God-given **gifts**—artistic gifts, practical gifts, skills, experience, and the **wisdom** that only comes **with age**! And you are willing, even **eager**, to share your gifts for the good of all. As we raise our Ebenezer, let us **confess** and **celebrate** the abundance God has given us. Let us move forward with confidence that we have the means, the tools, the skills and the will to accomplish, **with God's help**, the work God is calling us to do. (3) The third thing I know is something Rev. Jenny called out during her interview. It is yet **another** aspect of our **abundance**. The Search Committee interviewed Rev. Jenny in the home of

Brad Portin and Mark Wicks. The final part of the interview was a guided tour of our buildings and grounds. As we came back from visiting the columbarium and the meditation trail, Rev. Jenny said quietly, but clearly, “**There are so many possibilities!**” She recognized an **abundance of possibilities** at St. Augustine’s. That, my friends, is a **watchword** for our future together: “There are so many possibilities!” And, “with God, *nothing is impossible.*”

Now, our Epistle and Gospel readings have something **very important** to say about our future life together. First, the reading from Romans. I can think of no better **charge for us**, as we move forward: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.”

John’s gospel has been characterized as a **description** of the “beloved community”. In our gospel lesson, we are addressed directly, because we, **too**, are among those who believe in Jesus because of the word of his first disciples. We learn from John that the most characteristic mark of the beloved community is **mutual love**: between the Father and the Son, between Jesus and those who believe in him and between the believers themselves. Jesus says to his Father, “I made your name known to them...so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:26) If we heed Paul’s counsel, we will come to know the oneness John speaks of—we will become the beloved community in this place.

I invite you now to **help me** raise our Ebenezer by standing and singing the original second stanza of “Come Thou Fount”, which is **printed** in your bulletin on **page four**. And let’s **substitute “we”** for “I” as we sing. “Here we raise our Ebenezer, hither by thy help we’ve come, and we hope by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home....” [During the singing the Ebenezer stone is placed on the altar.]

AMEN