

“Stones of Remembrance – Ebenezer!”

I Sam. 7:12 1 Pet. 2:4-10 Mk 16:1-4

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Heidi Peterson, Don Frankland, and I were in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala to sign the Partnership Agreement with the Maya Quiche. Heidi was asked to preach for an evening worship at the Ebenezer Church and I was asked to offer the benediction. Neither of us had had much notice of these opportunities, but at least I had the length of Heidi’s sermon to think about what I would offer as a benediction.

And then it hit me. . . refer to their church name! Ebenezer - Eben-ezer....

And so when it was time I stood at the front of this small block building with a corrugated metal roof and told how the Israelites had been instructed to build Ebenezers in the wilderness of Sinai as a marker to show them how far they had come. . . and to serve as a guidepost so that they would not pass that way again.

And then I personalized it a bit for them and offered God’s blessings. Their pastor, Pedro Mejia, came back to the pulpit, smiled, and told us how they had come to choose their name for their church.

Their first church location had been too close to a nearby volcano and during an eruption they lost the building. They moved to a new location and built another building, only to have it washed away during a tropical storm that flooded the river next to the building. And so this was their third location and building – in the middle of a finca – a coffee plantation – and they chose Eben-ezer for their church because God had led them safe thus far! [I was properly humbled!!]

Samuel reveals that the image of a stone of blessing, an Ebenezer, had been both a figurative and literal experience and place prior to the Exodus. The prophet/judge Samuel set up a cairn between Mizpah and Jeshanah, called it Ebenezer, and said “Thus far has the Lord helped us!”

And yet, the more visceral recollection is the one of the Exodus experience.

The Israelites wandered for 40 years before crossing Jordan. They were NOT sojourners or pilgrims during this period, for they were not on their way to anywhere. . . . they were wanderers!

Survival is the key question for them. . . .they are not answering a call or responding to a promise, but simply staying alive. This image is in direct contrast to the Sunday School picture we may have grown up with of faithful Israelites trudging determinedly through the desert toward their goal: the land of milk and honey!

In fairness, it may be said that they were dimly on their way, but the biblical literature of this wilderness period doesn’t suggest that this was a time of resourceful faith. . . but rather, the mood was bitter, angry, restless, even hopeless.

I’ve been to the Sinai and it’s a vast expanse of sand and desert mountains. It would be easy to get lost. And so they were instructed to recall this image from Samuel and to set up “stones of blessing,” Ebenezers, to be guideposts of how far God had brought them. . . BUT ALSO, so they would not travel this way again needlessly!

I Samuel 7:12.....is read now...

It always happens. . . just when everything is going well and we are proceeding serenely down the road of life, we come to a crossroads and have to make choices! Yogi Berra gets a fair amount of ridicule for having said, in giving directions to his house, “when you come to a fork in the road – take it!” But the rest of the story is that he lived on a circle and it didn’t really matter which way you came – both directions would end up at his house!

Seldom is that the way it happens in our lives when faced with a crossroads! A job change occurs. We meet a special someone. A spouse dies. The economy nearly crashes. A call comes from God. . . . While each of us experience changes and choices differently, the reality is that many of us agonize over the crossroad choices that life brings our way.

Perhaps one of the most famous pieces ever written about choice is Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken,” in which Frost describes making a hard choice between two roads. . .and the difference that choice made in his life.

The challenge is that life’s really big choices are difficult even when we get lots of good advice, even when we read all the right “seven steps” books, even when we think we know what we want!

The Bible is the story of choices made at various crossroads by God’s people, and the theological implications of those choices! As Grace Covenant responds to its current crossroads, there will be lots of good advice and various “seven step” books, but we should also spend increased time with the instructions God has given us in how life should be faced.

Trite as it may sound, turn to the Scriptures when there are serious decisions to be made! In this day of biblical illiteracy, we turn to every other quick fix source of advice we can, but ignore the Good Book!

Deuteronomy makes a strong case for the importance of knowing God’s Word, keeping it in our hearts, reciting it to our children, talking about it at home and away from home, on going to bed and getting up in the morning! As you do this, I am confident - and know from experience – that you will have a clearer picture of what God is intending for you and which way you should go!

[The prayer of Confession is now prayed...]

I Peter 2:4-10. . . is read now.

The actor Tom Hanks describes his role as a shipwreck survivor in the movie, “Castaway,” as having certain autobiographical dimensions. “There’s this concept of being at the crossroads of one’s life, and feeling as though that is exactly where you’re supposed to be!”

Something wonderful can happen at crossroads! New opportunities surface; new adventures are possible; new discoveries are made. The very process of choice-making helps us find out something about ourselves! When we view crossroads as places where we’re supposed to be, decision making loses its burden and offers the gift of a joyful hope!

Crossroads are mentioned only twice in the Scriptures. . . one of them is in Jeremiah. The prophet suggests that the people do several things as they found themselves at their crossroads:

1] “Look for ancient paths and where the good way lies!” Stop and ask directions. Good advice and can save lots of time and energy. . .

2] Walk in that good way. . . . It’s not enough to know that the path is there. As new friends in Kenya said to us, “Put your feet in the path!” It takes commitment to make the journey!

3] and, says Jeremiah, find rest for your souls! What does he mean? I think it is very likely that it has to do with those ancient paths, that good way. Jesus may well have been thinking of this imagery when He said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

So, which way to go?! Well, in the Scriptures we find that being a geographical question, sometimes a behavioral question, at times a moral question, and often a theological question! All of these possible meanings contain the possibility of a right way or a wrong way. . . The biblical story is about find God’s way!

The author of that great Letter to the Hebrews chronicles a grand overview of that biblical story and the heroes of faith who followed in the Way! In speaking of Sarah and Abraham, he writes that they set out on their journey, not knowing where they were going. . . . and along the way they lived in tents!

A wonderful bumper sticker comes to mind: “All who wander are not lost!” Because we are at this crossroads does not mean we are lost. Setting up Eben-ezers is a way of saying that we believe that this time we are in is watched over by the One Who is its initiator! We believe that God’s steadfast love guides us through the changes . . . therefore our response should be gratitude and praise!

Because we are God’s people, we can boldly move forward, pitching our tents a day’s march nearer home!