

1 Sam 7:12-14

¹²Then 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." ¹³So 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. ¹⁴The 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.

While traveling throughout Alaska with a group of clergy earlier this month, we had the opportunity to visit a number of churches. On the way to Seward one day, we stopped in at the tiniest church I ever witnessed in Girdwood, a little resort town. The footprint was a diamond that would literally fit inside our chapel. It was like the chapels you see along the road to stop in and pray. But this place actually held worship services each Sunday, with sometimes up to 150 people crammed into that little space. Now, that church had made a journey a mile down the road, for you see the congregation had purchased a larger lot in town and were in the midst of building a newer, much larger church, for they had grown out of their quaint little building. We got to witness a VIM team in action working to build the new church. As we toured the new building and grounds, the pastor said, come around the front of the building so we can show you our Ebenezer.

Not wanting to be the first to sound too ignorant, in this group of clergy I was leading, I didn't shout out, "What's an Ebenezer?" Some of you may already know. It's in 2nd verse of one of my most beloved hymns that we sang this morning, *Come thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The 2nd verse begins "*Here I raise my Ebenezer, Hither by thy help I'm come.*"

At the front of the church there was pile of rocks, an Ebenezer. This goes way back in scripture to 1 Samuel. After a long period of sadness and trouble, a consequence of Israel's disobedience, Israel repented under the leadership of Samuel, a new priest and judge. God restored their political security, and the people recommitted their hearts and minds to God. 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.*" He publicly dedicated it as a monument to God's help & faithfulness. The stone stood as a reminder of God's presence in their lives. The Ebenezer stone represented a fresh beginning.

The word "Ebenezer" comes from two Hebrew words pronounced together: *Even Haazer*. *Haazer*- meaning "help" and *Even* – meaning "stone". The etymological root of the word "Ebenezer" is, literally, a "*Stone of Help*." It was a reminder of God's Real, Holy Presence and Divine aid. Spiritually and theologically, an Ebenezer can be nearly anything that reminds us of God's presence and help: the Bible, the Sacraments, a memory, a hymn – those things which serve as reminders of God's love, God's Real Presence, and God's assistance are "Ebenezers."

For the Girdwood church, they carried the rocks from their previous site where the church was originally built to the new site, and erected it as their Ebenezer, a reminder that God had been with them in the past, and promise that God would be with them in the future.

There is actually an ancient spiritual practice that incorporates this way of remembering God's faithful presence with us. It's called the "Daily Examen." The best resource I have found for this practice is in this book entitled, "*Sleeping with Bread*". The preface begins:

During the bombing raids of WWII, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."

The understanding behind this was that children could literally hold on to the promise that there would be enough to eat the next day. It was a reminder that God was with them, and they could sleep easier being thankful for the promises of God.

St. Ignatius (1491-1556) wrote *The Spiritual Exercises* which have guided Christians for centuries. The exercises begin by recommending that everyone be taught the examen. Ignatius expected that God would speak through our deepest feelings and yearnings, what he called "consolation" and "desolation." Consolation is whatever helps us connect with God, ourselves, others & the universe.

Desolation is whatever disconnects us. God is constantly revealing Godself to us in our experience.

The examen makes us aware of moments that at first we might easily pass by as insignificant, moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives. The Examen provides a way of noticing where God shows up in our day. It is a practice that attends to what we might otherwise miss in the busy-ness of our day. The questions of the examen open our attention to how God's internal movement is present in our external comings and goings. They lead us to listen deeply to the details of our lives. The examen helps us recognize the things that bring us death and life. Once these things are known, they become part of our ongoing interaction with God in prayer.

The Prayer of Examen has two basic aspects, like the two sides of a door or coin. The first is an examen of consciousness through which we discover how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we have responded to God's loving presence. The second aspect is an examen of conscience in which we uncover those areas that need healing.

For centuries prayerful people have found direction for their day and for their life by identifying these moments of what brings consolation & desolation. There are many ways to ask the question:

- When did I feel most alive today? When did I most feel life draining out of me?
- When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe? When did I have the least sense of belonging?
- When was I happiest today? When was I saddest?
- What was today's high point? What was the low point?
- For what moment today am I most grateful? Least Grateful?
- What was the most life-giving for me? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day?
- When did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others and myself? The least sense of connection?
- When did I give and receive the most love? When did I give and receive the least love?

Perspective and direction for the future happen through listening to where and how God shows up in your day and then interacting with God in prayer. Puts us in touch with the kind of person God invites us to be.

As you get in touch with what you are grateful for and what you are not so grateful for, you are invited to name it, feel it, and appreciate that you are not denying it, and that God is present. Healing occurs to the degree we can welcome all the feelings and allow ourselves to be loved in them. This way we can honestly acknowledge pain and take in love. Then we can sleep with a grateful heart.

If we go to sleep with a grateful heart and expect to awaken saying thank you, the gratitude bathes our unconscious and we can awaken more grateful. But if we go to sleep resentful, we fill our unconscious with more resentment and awaken ready to strike back. The more often we sleep with a grateful heart, the more our unconscious selves are healed. Then when the alarm rings, we can say, "I think I need another hour of healing my unconscious," and fall back asleep without feeling guilty.

Give the congregation the time and opportunity to practice the Prayer of the Examen during worship.

The Prayer of the Examen

- 1) Recall you are in the presence of God.
In God we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)
We are always in the presence of God, but in prayer we place ourselves in God's presence in an especially attentive way. God, your Creator know and loves you in the deepest way possible. The Holy Spirit, guides and guards us too. We ask the Holy spirit to help us look at our life with love this day.
- 2) Look at your day with gratitude.
And Mary said: My soul proclaims the greatness of God. The Almighty One has done great things for me. (Luke 1:46, 49)
After a few moments, begin to give thanks to God for the gifts of this day. Special pleasures will spring to mind: a good night's sleep, the smell of the morning coffee, the laugh of a child. As you move through the details of your day, remember that every single event has been God's gift. God is found in the concrete details of the day. Take special care to notice what you received. As you complete the review of the particular gifts of this day, pause to thank God.
- 3) Ask help from the Holy Spirit.
When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all truth. John 16:13
Look at the ways in which you have responded to God's gracious gifts and love this day. Ask for the Holy Spirit to come into your heart and to help you look at your actions this day clearly and with an understanding of your own limitations. The Spirit will help you understand the mystery of your human heart. The Spirit will help us learn more about our actions and motivations.
- 4) Review your day
Test yourselves to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. Perhaps you do not realize that Christ Jesus is within you. 2 Cor. 13:5