

# COME THOU FOUNT

If you ever wonder if God works in powerful ways, I have a story for you. Now, I couldn't have planned this; I'm not this creative. It is the very powerful and funny way that God works. Before camp, I picked this song for our sermon today totally not thinking about that fact that I'd be writing about one of my favorite lines from all of Christian hymndom while sitting at one of my favorite places on earth: Lake Poinsett Camp. If you've been around here for awhile, you may remember what exactly Poinsett means to me. It's where I came to claim my faith as my own; it's where my call to ministry was first named (even though I didn't realize it at the time). It is where my love of camp and retreat ministry was reignited as I counseled a camp for the first time, and it is still my favorite place to dean (even after what was a little bit of a rocky week). It is an important place to me. It is place where I've experienced God's presence and God's power and God's love. I might even go so far as to say that Poinsett is an ebenezer in my life of faith.

Today, as we continue our Summer Setlist message series, we return to the hymnal and talk about Robert Robinson's masterpiece "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Written in 1758, its inspiration comes from Robert's own life, which is forever tied to Methodism in England. As with many stories of faith and calls to ministry, it comes out of no where, and God shows up in the most amazing way. His father died when he was eight, and in 1749 at age fourteen he was indentured by his mother to a barber in London. While in London Robinson did not choose his friends wisely. Robinson and his friends would regularly drink and then go to the tent revivals across London, not out of interest in religion but rather to mock religion and anyone was having a genuine encounter with God. On one such occasion, the group had gone to see

the most popular open-air preacher at the time, George Whitefield (who you might remember was a dear friend of John Wesley), but astonishingly, God showed up, and Whitefield's preaching took hold of young Robinson. He professed his faith in 1755 and entered the ministry as a Methodist preacher before joining an independent church in Norway and eventually became the pastor of Stone Bridge Baptist Church in Cambridge. He wrote this hymn in 1758 as a part of a sermon, as a prayer, a prayer that the Holy Spirit to flood into his listener's hearts with God's streams of mercy. But, in light of our scripture this morning, the line I am most struck by is this: "Here I raise mine ebenezer; hither by thy help I'm come. Here I raise mine ebenezer."

This song and Robinson's life are in and of themselves ebenezers. Not a character in a Christmas Carol, thank you very much, Mr. Dickens. "Here I raise my ebenezer" does not mean we're raising our best version of a grumpy, rich, Englishman. So, what does it mean then? What is an ebenezer?

Samuel helps us to answer the question. By the time Samuel became the judge over Israel, they had again forsaken God's teachings and forsaken God's ways and found themselves in trouble as they so often did. So, Samuel, a devout and faithful man, challenged the nation of Israel to return: "If you're turning to the Lord with all your heart, it has to be all the way. No more false idols; no more lesser regional gods. Follow God with all your heart." He gathers the entire nation of Israel near Mizpah, about seven miles north of Jerusalem, and there prayed for them and offered sacrifice to the Lord on their behalf. Sensing the opportunity, the Philistines learned of the assembly and attacked Israel at Mizpah. It should have been their doom: a surprise attack when the faithful are not expecting it, engaging in worship, and seemingly cut off from their

supplies and whatever munitions they had at their disposal. They were seemingly hopeless; except, nope. God was watching over them. And the Lord, in a mighty demonstration of power defeated the Philistines and saved Israel. It was the Lord who did this. It wasn't cunning prowess or scrappy resistance or even true grit. It was the Lord who did this. It was the Lord's doing; it was divine victory. It is God who is the source of every blessing.

So, to commemorate this amazing thing that GOD had done, this great triumph, Samuel built a monument between Mizpah and Shen (whose location is unknown), a monument which he called Ebenezer. Literally it means "a stone of God's help."

I value so much from the faith and faithfulness of our Hebrew ancestors and our Jewish faith-cousins. The Hebrew Bible is full of stories of God's people encountering God's presence and then doing something to commemorate the site: building an altar, raising an ebenezer, ensuring that future generations remember what God has done and put hope in God will do! He erected a stone to mark a time where God had helped them. (I mean... they'd go on to forget again...and again..and again, so take that for what you will; I admire their intentions.)

When the ark landed and Noah and his family disembarked from the ark, they built an altar. When God first appeared to Abram and promised a land flowing with milk and honey, Abram responded by building an altar. When Jacob a generation later reunited with his estranged brother Esau, he built an altar at the place called El-Elohe-Israel. He then returns to where there estrangement had happened in Bethel and set an altar there, as well. I could go on and on.

When it comes to your own life of faith, when we experience God's goodness or God's protection or God's saving hand, how do we commemorate it? Do we even tell? I know that as a pastor and specifically as your pastor, I have the honor of hearing your God stories and observing your lives of faith for the changes that God is working in you. And it just blows me away. But, I come back to this: how you commemorate, remember, and rejoice in God's work on your behalf? Where in your life would you say you raise an ebenezer? What impact has God's saving hand had on your life, and how are you marking the journey so that your future generations know your faith story and the important places that have made you who you are?

Israel marked their faith journey in stone, stones of God's help; ebenezers. And I mentioned at the beginning of this message that this song Robinson wrote was one of those. A story from the near-end of his life illustrates why: One thing that plagued Robert in his life was doubt and anxiety about faith and God and religion as a whole. And though a preacher, he eventually succumbed to his doubts and stopped preaching. But one day, as he was riding in a stagecoach, he heard a woman humming a familiar tune. He asked what she was humming; she told him and asked him what he thought of the song. He responded, "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then." It is said that she responded by telling him "Sir, the 'streams of mercy' are still flowing." This ebenezer song provided him the words to return to his faith. Never underestimate the power of ebenezers, reminders of faith, and stones of God's help.