

INTRODUCTION:

When researching for the sermon this week, I came across a classic hymn called “God Leads His Dear Children Along,” which speaks to God’s ever-presence, even in the middle of trials of this life. To prepare our hearts and minds to dive into the Scripture this morning, I’m going to read the words:

In shady, green pastures, so rich and so sweet, God leads His dear children along;

Where the water’s cool flow bathes the weary one’s feet, God leads His dear children along.

Some through the waters, some through the flood, Some through the fire, but all through the blood; Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song, In the night season and all the day long.

Sometimes on the mount where the sun shines so bright, God leads His dear children along;
Sometimes in the valley, in darkest of night, God leads His dear children along.

Though sorrows befall us and Satan oppose, God leads His dear children along;
Through grace we can conquer, defeat all our foes, God leads His dear children along.

Away from the mire, and away from the clay, God leads His dear children along;

Away up in glory, eternity's day, God leads His dear children along.

Transition:

In our Scripture this morning, we follow the people of Israel on a rollercoaster ride of defeat and restoration as they are reminded that through all of the valleys and mountaintops of life, God is our ever-present help.

A. The Story-Historical Background:

Our story actually begins in 1 Samuel 4 at Ebenezer, which means stone of help. Remember that, because it's going to come back around later. Ebenezer was the site where the Israelites went into battle against the Philistines, and to make sure they had God's favor to win the battle, they brought out the Ark of the Covenant, sort of like a magic talisman. Israel was badly defeated, and to add insult to injury, the Philistines stole the Ark! On top of that, when Eli the high priest heard about the loss of the battle, the stolen Ark, and that both of his sons had been killed, he fell off of his chair and died.

Israel had lost the relics of her faith and her spiritual leaders. And ultimately they felt like God had abandoned them. In a way, God did, but not by His choice but because they had turned away from Him and worshipped other gods. Because Israel **WAS** lost, Israel **HAD** lost everything.

The Philistines did not fare well while possessing the ark. God may have allowed the Philistines to take the Ark as a lesson to the Israelites, but He in no way sided with the Philistines. After they took the ark, to the city of Ashdod and placed it by a statue of the Philistine God Dagon. But overnight, the idol 'mysteriously' fell over twice, and the second time his hands had broken off. On top of this, the people in Ashdod and the surrounding country were struck by tumors. So the people decided to send it to the Philistine city of Gath, whose people did not want the ark; they too were struck with tumors. It was sent to the city of Ekron, whose people were even more decidedly against taking possession of the ark. And what happened in Ekron? People died, and those who didn't were struck down by tumors.

After 7 months of this, the Philistines decided that they no longer wanted this curse, so they consulted their priests, who told them to send the ark out with golden mice and golden tumors as a guilt offering. They then set the ark on a cart pulled by ox, and sent it off towards the land of the Israelites, where after a few more interesting episodes, it finally ended up at the house of Abinadab, where it remained for 20 years.

It was at this time that Samuel called the people to repentance, to leave behind their Baals and Astarte idols that they had been worshipping to and to return to God. And if they would do

that, God would restore them from the oppression that they were facing at the hands of the Philistines.

The Philistines, deciding that the Israelites were vulnerable during this time of repentance and fasting, set off to attack them. The Israelites got wind of this attack, and begged Samuel to continue to pray on their behalf to God. Samuel continued to pray, offered a sacrifice, and as the Philistines descended on the Israelites God's voice boomed across the land and the Philistines were thrown into fear and confusion. So the Israelites drove out and defeated the Philistines, seven months after they had been crushed and their spirits broken.

Samuel sets up a stone at this place and called it "Ebenezer;" and now the name of the place of their defeat would be the name to remind them of God's provision. And of Ebenezer, he says "Thus far the Lord has helped us." This landmark was meant to be a reminder of how God had actively working to restore them even after their humiliation, and as they would go forward and would face future problems, they could remember that he had not left them and would not leave them. And they would persevere.

B) What do we learn from this story?

1) God is always with us and at work on behalf of us. He never left the people of Israel, and even when they were at their lowest, he had a plan to restore them.

2) God desires genuine faith in Him, and not to be used as a token. When the ark was wielded as a 'holy weapon' against the Philistines, God gave the Israelites over. Because it wasn't that they believed in His power, it was that they thought he could be used like some magical talisman. But when the people genuinely repented and worshipped, God received them back.

3) We can look to the past as a reminder of God's continuing presence. We can establish our own "Ebenezers" and be reminded, in the midst of uncertainty that "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

C) How do we respond?

1. What does this mean for us personally?

a. How we actually respond:

i. **DIY:** Sometimes, when things seem to be uncertain or going wrong, it can be easy to feel as if we need to take on the troubles on our own and forget to even ask God for help. We can try to fix things without God's help, and oftentimes in doing so we only make things worse.

ii. **Disappointment leads to distrust:** We may come to a place that we are so disappointed with the circumstances that we lose hope that God is with us or that things will ever change. Or we

iii. Diversions: Finally, sometimes, we get so wrapped up in what's happening that it becomes all consuming, and we live as if we were wearing blinders, so that we are unable to see the way that God is working around us. With this narrowed vision, it can be easy to dismiss God at work. Scratched into the walls of a concentration camp is this anonymous poem written about the power of hope in God in the midst of those things that take away our attention: "I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in Love, even when I alone. I believe in God, even when he is silent."

b. How we should respond: These are the ways we often respond to troubles. But how could we respond? What if instead, we can lay our own Ebenezer and say "God has brought me thus far." Consider in your own life and experiences, where have you experienced God's goodness and help? How has he brought you from where you were to where you are?

2. What does this mean for us corporately?

In the life of a congregation, there will be ups and downs, changes, times of stability and times of instability, times of growth and times of decline. But in all of those times, I am convinced that we can see God at work if we just look. Just like with our personal lives, when the church is in the midst of a change and things seem up in the air, it can feel difficult to see

where God might be leading, and we might even ask, where is God now, and are we really following Him?

So what should we do? Like Samuel and the Israelites, we need to constantly be returning to God, repenting of our sins, offering ourselves up. We need to have a true and genuine faith, reminding ourselves and others that God is here, that God is in control, and that God has not nor will he ever leave. And we need to establish our Ebenezer, saying “Thus far the Lord has helped us.” God has been with Oak Grove Mennonite Church since its very beginning, and through all of the changes, the times of fruitfulness and times of struggle, He never left. And while we have a task ahead of us, to look at who we have been and to seek God’s vision for who we will be, we can be assured that “Thus far the Lord has helped us,” and he will continue to help us.

One of my favorite songs of all time is “Come Thou Fount.” I love the melody, I love the poetic interplay of the lyrics, and I love the way in which it commands my attention to praise God. The second verse is based on 1 Samuel 7; we sing these words:

*Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy great help I've come.
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, Safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, Wandering from the fold of
God
He, to rescue me from danger, Interposed His precious blood.*

We establish our Ebenezers, reminding ourselves and one another that God has helped, and by God's grace, he will continue to guide us. We remember that although at one time we were all separated from God by sin, Jesus sought us and found us and died for us so that we might live.