

Today being December 29 makes today only the 5th Day of Christmas! This means we still have a full week of feasting and celebrating what it means that God became human, that we have walked the Road to Bethlehem.

Christmas is much too big to fit just into December 25. So today, I want to think for a few minutes with you about the fourth most popular Christmas character (by my extremely unscientific reckoning):

Ebenezer Scrooge

(And since I know it will bother you otherwise, here's my ranking: Jesus - duh, then Santa, then the Grinch and then Scrooge. If you disagree with me, we can have a spirited debate in the foyer afterwards. But wherever you rank him, let's talk about old Scrooge for a bit.)

Ebenezer Scrooge is the main character in Charles Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol*. He's a wealthy old man whose love of wealth has squashed every joy in his life. He abuses his employees and is utterly alone.

On Christmas Eve, old Ebenezer is visited by four ghosts who warn him that his sinful, miserly ways have doomed him. In the end, the ghosts' warnings work and Ebenezer has reformed, becoming a charitable and kind man.

We love this story because we love stories of redemption. Stories like this are promises to us, that it's never too late to abandon the sinful paths we all walk toward death. The power of this story has made old Ebenezer Scrooge a cultural institution - we still refer to people who can't get into the Christmas spirit as "Scrooges" and laughingly chide them with Ebenezer's catchphrase: Bah, Humbug!"

Ebenezer Scrooge is a reminder to all of us that Christmas is a season to give, to share, to love. And though *A Christmas Carol* isn't explicitly religious, we who follow Jesus recognize the core of the Christmas story in there: the powerful are brought low, the poor are exalted. Everyone finds life in the self-giving love Jesus embodies.

The name Dickens chose for his unlikely hero is telling: the word Ebenezer is a powerful biblical image, one taken from the book of 1 Samuel 7 (turn there with me in your Bibles). If you grabbed one of our Bibles off the rack on the way in, you can find 1 Samuel 7 on page XXX. And if you don't own a bible, we'd love for you to consider the one you're holding a gift from us. Keep it and use it!

A little bit of setup for 1 Samuel 7 as you're turning there: at this point in Israel's history, God's physical presence is represented by the Ark of the Covenant (like the one from Indiana Jones). There is no Temple yet, so the ark is kept in various tabernacles (think a sort of portable temple nomadic cultures would use for worship). Any time Israel goes into battle with a neighboring tribe, the ark is carried into battle with them to symbolize God fighting for them.

So: a few months before what we're about to read, Israel had gone into battle against the Philistines and lost. The Philistines captured the ark, and Israel despaired. But the ark proved... disruptive... in the Philistine villages (it's a hilarious, awesome story you should read this week in 1 Samuel 6). So the Philistines give the ark back to Israel.

1 Samuel 7 is the story of Israel receiving the Ark of the Covenant back from the Philistines. As you can imagine, they are overwhelmed, overjoyed. Samuel - the unofficial spiritual and political leader of Israel at the time - throws a huge party at a place called Mizpah. Let's read what happens, beginning in verse 5:

Samuel told them, "Gather all of Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the Lord for you." So they gathered at Mizpah and, in a great ceremony, drew water from a well and poured it out before the Lord. They also went without food all day and confessed that they had sinned against the Lord. (It was at Mizpah that Samuel became Israel's judge.)

When the Philistine rulers heard that Israel had gathered at Mizpah, they mobilized their army and advanced. The Israelites were badly frightened when they learned that the Philistines were approaching. "Don't stop pleading with the Lord our God to save us from the Philistines!" they begged Samuel. So Samuel took a young lamb and offered it to the Lord as a whole burnt offering. He pleaded with the Lord to help Israel, and the Lord answered him.

Just as Samuel was sacrificing the burnt offering, the Philistines arrived to attack Israel. But the Lord spoke with a mighty voice of thunder from heaven that day, and the Philistines were thrown into such confusion that the Israelites defeated them. The men of Israel chased them from Mizpah to a place below Beth-car, slaughtering them all along the way.

Samuel then took a large stone and placed it between the towns of Mizpah and Jeshanah.* He named it Ebenezer (which means "the stone of help"), for he said, "Up to this point the Lord has helped us!" -- 1 Samuel 7:5-12

Ebenezer means "stone of help". An Ebenezer is a monument to God's work in our lives. Samuel built one so that Israel would always remember how God had rescued them from their enemies. So that when generations after them would ask "What's with the rocks?", their parents and grandparents could tell the story of God's faithfulness.

An Ebenezer is a reminder of God's faithfulness. It's a prompt not to forget God's generosity and provision. That was Scrooge's problem: he didn't recognize all he had was a gift from God, that he had been created to be generous the way God had been generous to him. That God's gifts aren't to puff us up, but to enable us to give as well.

So here we are at the end of 2013. We're all looking toward next year, considering our resolutions, wondering what 2014 will bring. So let's pause a few moments here to look back at where we've been as a church family this year. To remember what God has been teaching us:

[**First Things First** title] We began the year - appropriately - in Genesis. We asked what it looks like to live in God's world on God's terms. How we can shape our lives according to God's pattern. Because a life that looks like Jesus is the life that is truly life.

[**Venom** title] During Lent we looked at the reality that we don't follow God's way. Each of us chooses Sin - chooses to follow any number of paths other than the one God calls us to. We spent some serious time reflecting on the consequences of our sinful choices in our own lives, in our relationships and in our world. We then heard the good news that Jesus rescues us from ourselves, that his death and resurrection opens up the way back to God.

[**Already/Not Yet title**] After Easter, as we prepared to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, we explored the tension that comes from living between Easter and the Second Coming. In the resurrection, we can be part of God's new life. But we still wrestle with the reality of living in a broken world. God's new kingdom has already come. But it's not yet here!

[**Kingdom Parables title - maybe all three on the same screen somehow?**] Over the summer, we camped out in Jesus' parables about his new life. These various stories we read together described the Kingdom of God and what it looks like for us to be part of it.

[**Next Right Thing title**] In September, we celebrated 60 years as Beavercreek Church of the Nazarene and considered what our Next Right Step is as a church. In the next decade, we want to be a Church that connects and engages unchurched people in our neighborhoods. We want to have a Spiritual Formation map that presents a clear, coherent and simple guide to help people take the next right step in their relationship with God. And we want everything we do on Sunday mornings - both of our worship gatherings - to welcome those who are far from God, to help them connect and engage the good news about Jesus.

[**BOLD title**] We then spent 6 weeks hearing stories of BOLD faith both from the Scriptures and from those around the world who suffer for their faith. We were challenged and inspired by their stories, and so at the climax of the series, on the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, we gathered with over 400 brothers and sisters from around Southwest Ohio to hear the story of Pastor Saeed Abedini and his wife Naghmeh, to pray for them and all our fellow believers around the world who suffer for their choice to follow Jesus.

[**Gratitude title**] Just before the Advent season, we took a couple of weeks to ask what it means to be grateful both to God and others.

[**Road to Bethlehem title**] And then, for the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we considered the traditional Nativity scene. We considered each of the characters - the magi, the shepherds, the conspicuously absent Herod and the holy family. We asked what their roads to Bethlehem looked like. And we used their journeys to reflect on our own stories of rescue, of encountering God.

That's the journey Beavercreek Nazarene has been on in 2013: taking seriously the good news that the new life Jesus offers, that excessive, overflowing newness that is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit begins now. Today.

The Kingdom of God isn't only something we wait for. We participate in it now. And so with that in mind, I want to introduce you to some members of our family here who've been experiencing God's new life in powerful ways this year:

[stories]

Raising an Ebenezer

These are only three of literally hundreds of stories of what God is doing in the middle of Beavercreek Ohio. Each of you here today has a story as well.

And we would do well not to forget those stories. We would do well - just like the Israelites - to build monuments to them. So that in the days, months, years and decades to come we can look back on 2013 and remember what God has done in our lives this year. Right now.

Because we are a forgetful people. We so easily become Ebenezer Scrooges, selfish and ungrateful. Ebenezers remind us what God has done for us.

So I hope you got a bulletin on the way in. If you open it, you'll find the Discussion Guide in there at the top, but you'll also find below that some blank space with a question there:

What will your Ebenezer for 2013 be?

We're going to take a few minutes of silence here for you to prayerfully consider the past year. What has God done in your life?

And how can you memorialize that? How can you raise an Ebenezer in your life? I know some of you are builders. Some of you are crafty. Some of you are artists or writers.

What will you make this week to celebrate what God has done in your life this year? Maybe create something with your spouse, or as a whole family.

In the next few minutes, jot down some notes. Begin the process of reflecting on what God has done for you and then imagine how you can mark that in your life.

Create something. Memorialize how God has rescued you, how God has shaped you. How God is working and moving. And tell that story!