

September 11, 2022

Sermon Given by Rev. Kennedy

Prayers for Queen Elizabeth and her family. Today is the 21st anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. I remember that Queen Elizabeth The monarch broke with centuries-old tradition, directing the Coldstream Guards to play the American national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," during the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace.

Repair the Breach

I Samuel 7 and Isaiah 58

God has helped us in the past. The KJV of our text: "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." Gardner Taylor said, "If life is to make sense, yesterday's experience must have something to do with today's living. We are to gain confidence for today by what happened yesterday." Life would be nearly impossible if we had to start each morning with a fresh slate. Our text teaches us a needed lesson: God has helped us in the past and God will help us now.

But we have amnesia. Some people can't remember when the Lord helped us. When we start to doubt that the Lord will provide, when we forget that God gives maximum support and minimum protection, when we lose sight of the bread, the wine, we are suffering amnesia. There are church members who say, "I still believe in God, but I don't go to church." Well, I am not doubting that statement, but I believe that God is more present in God's church than anywhere else in our lives. God's salvation is made present in and through the church. Church matters. God's house matters. The church matters for how we do Christianity. The critics tell me the church is dying. Well, if they are right, then we need to get our house in order and die for the right reasons. The church has always taken ordinary people and enabled them to do extraordinary things. I believe it is a mistake of tragic proportions for people to abandon the church.

God is present in the Church in a different and unique way. God is not some generalized spirit which gives meaning to our lives. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God blesses people through the church. God has not chosen to bless the world through the NFL. The best place to meet God is the church. God is present in God's house. Stanley Hauerwas puts it exactly right for me: "God saves us through setting up this rock in Palestine called Jesus." The Church is the location where God gives God's word, shares

God's power in the sacraments, makes available divine help. To forget that is to wander off from the church and attempt to live life alone, mumbling: "I'm not religious but I'm spiritual." I hate to break it to you, but I don't think we are strong enough to pull it off.

I want to stop here and do an unusual thing. I want to speak to our church members who haven't been here for a long time. In communication studies we call it an imagined conversation.

Maybe you have been pushed to the edge because of huge responsibilities, you work day and night to provide for your family, but you feel pushed and pulled here and there, you don't know what to do next. If you don't know which way to turn, remember that in the past God has helped you. Return to the church – your refuge in the storm.

We are holding your place for you. Your name is on the roll. You signed the scroll in your own handwriting, and we are here waiting for you to return. Like the caring father looking down the road for the return of the lost son, we look both ways down Nott Terrace for you. Is it time for some of you to get back to where you once gave your sweat and tears, where you once gave your money, where you once sang the great hymns of the faith, where you attended Sunday school, where you served on boards and committees, where you prayed and laughed and cried and shared meals and friendships and built relationships. You can have all that again. Just show up! No judgment awaits you. No guilt trip. Welcome home is what you get. Joy piled on top of joy at your presence is what you get.

Now, turning to the story in I Samuel 7 about Ebenezer. A hymn from my childhood floated into my consciousness this week.

Here I raise my Ebenezer,
Hither by thine help I've come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.

"Let thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to thee." A fetter is Old English for a chain. I like the idea of being chained to God's goodness so that I don't wander away from the faith. I confess to you, that I couldn't make it without the church, without the regular practice of worship, without the celebration of Holy Communion. I need it every Sunday and wait impatiently for you to have it once a month. I don't need a church that agrees with me. I don't want a church that tells me that I am a good person and can do as I please. I need a church that binds me to the grace of God,

that tells me what I need to do and makes me do it. The Achilles heel of liberalism: lack of discipline and lack of accountability.

Samuel's Ebenezer came after a 20-year lamenting over a terrible defeat. For twenty years, Israel had been mourning a difficult defeat in the same place they were now going to experience a victory. It was like a twenty-year losing streak. Some of us know about losing streaks. When was the last time your favorite team won the World Series? The New York Mets – 1986. Yankees – 2009. The New York Jets – 1969. The New York Giants – 2012. A lament for you, right? Israel has been losing for twenty long years of defeat and misery. And on this day, the Lord gives them the victory.

I believe that if a group of people, in fact, this group of people sitting in front of me, decided to make it a matter of praying for all our absent fellow church members, that a slight crack in the door might occur, that allows God to speak to the hearts of our "dearly departed" from church, and whisper in their hearts a longing to return, to come home.

As much as we might wish that praying was like rubbing Aladdin's Lamp, poofing out a genie, and getting 3 wishes, that is not how it works. We are called to pray without ceasing, without answers. I am asking that you put praying for one another on your daily prayer list and that you pray for those not coming. You know some of the members that aren't here, so call them by name in your prayers. These are your fellow Christians. They have been baptized. When you are baptized, you are marked with the sign of the cross. You belong to God. You are a member of the body of Christ. You can run. You can hide. Hell, you could go into witness protection programs, but our prayers will find you.

The people asked for Samuel's prayers: "Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us." I hope that our church members ask for me to pray for them. This again may sound old-fashioned to you, but we all need someone pleading before God on our behalf. Many of us know that we have been sustained over the years because mother and fathers, brothers and sisters, have prayed us back to God.

My grandfather was a Baptist preacher, and his prayers would fill those little sanctuaries where he labored as a pastor. My father prayed for me every day. When I came home for a visit, he would say prayers for my ministry. Right in the middle of anything, Dad would say "Let's pray." Our baseball team could run off the field to bat in the bottom of the last inning, trailing 4-2 and he would gather us down the left field line and say, "Let's pray." The

man prayed. He was so much better at it than I am, but I am coming back around to an awareness of how much we need to be a praying people.

This church is our Ebenezer – this is the evidence that the Lord has helped us. If these walls could talk, what stories they would tell us of how the Lord has helped us “Thus far.” This church, this stone of remembrance tells of a great victory, a great institution, a powerful house of God. It is here to remind us of our past and to prepare us for our future. Through the hearing of the word together as a body God creates a unity known nowhere else in the world. He binds us to one another, chains us to his goodness and grace, and makes us slaves for righteousness.

Your presence here means that you are taking responsibility for all the members of this church, especially the ones who are not here on Sunday. You are holding the line, maintaining the presence of God in this part of our city. I am in the process of asking over 250 persons who are members of our church if they will consider coming back to the church. Let’s ask people to come back. Listen, every old rock and roll group in the world seems to be getting back together in their golden years. The Stone Temple Pilots packed out my parking lot last night for a concert. I hate playing second fiddle to a grunge, hard rock band. The church needs a reunion tour.

Now, take one quick look at our other reading this morning: Repairer of the breach. We are so desperate for someone to repair the breach that we have started believing that political consultants, political hacks, political pundits, can save us with some fancy words or slogans. The raging Cajun, James Carville, coined the phrase, “It’s the economy stupid.” Slogans can frame elections, maybe help win elections, but they can’t change the character of the American people.

This sermon is going to come to an end with some action. I want each of you to come forward, one at a time, and place your rock next to mine, and say your name out loud. Then I want you to bow your head, and I will lay my hands on your head, and say, “You are _____, and upon this rock Jesus will build his church and repair the breach.”

Let’s end the sermon together. Come and present your rock.