

1 Sam. 7:12 “Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.’”

Luther’s German translation: “Da nahm Samuel einen Stein und setzte ihn zwischen Mispa und Sen; und hiesz ihn Eben-Ezer und sprach: ‘Bis hierher hat uns der HERR geholfen.’”

Dear members, former members and friends of Ebenezer congregation and my dear colleague in the ministry, Pastor Zastrow:

Thanks for the invitation to preach at the 165th anniversary of your congregation. Yours in one that is still alive and well after many years. As District President I have seen many congregations close over these years—both in rural areas as well as large cities. But “Hitherto the LORD has helped” your congregation to remain a solid congregation of growth and outreach. So today we gather to shout our praise to the Triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who has watched over and blessed you for these 165 years.

To aid our praise and our assurance of the Lord’s blessings upon the past and with solid hope for the future let us consider the text before us – the text that your German forefathers chose as your congregation’s new name in 1849 – under the theme:

“HITHERTO AND HENCEFORTH!”

We shall see in this theme that the God who has helped you continue in ministry in the past and to the present is also with you for the future challenges.

The background of our text brings out in full the meaning of the verse before us. Israel had been at the mercy of the Philistine rulers and their strong armies. The LORD had allowed this to come upon them because of their idolatry and sin. In a fairly recent battle the Philistines had defeated the armies of Israel and had captured the Ark of the Covenant and carried it away. But the Lord sent grave illnesses upon the Philistines and they decided to send it back to Israel. They put it on a wagon, hitched two cows to pull it. When they were released, directed by the LORD, the cows headed straight for Israelite domain. The people rejoiced. And the Ark remained at a place called Keriath-jearim for twenty years. Samuel was at that time serving as judge in Israel and was recognized by them as their leader. He urged the people to put away their idols and to worship the Lord only with sincere repentance. The people hearkened to his call to repentance. He called them together at Mizpah for an assembly of repentance.

The Philistines heard of this and gathered to battle Israel whom they had earlier defeated. Israel was fearful. They remembered what had happened the last time they had met the Philistines for battle. The Israelites kept asking Samuel to pray to the LORD for them. When the Philistines were ready to attack the LORD sent a huge thunderstorm upon them and they were scattered with Israel in the chase for victory. Afterwards Samuel set up a huge stone between Mizpah and Shen as a memorial and called it “Ebenezer”, which in Hebrew means “The Stone of Help”, dedicating it with the words of our text: “Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.” Right after our text this word is written: “So the Philistines

were subdued, and they came no more into the coast of Israel: and the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel.”

So, my friends, you also have erected a huge stone on your property calling it with the same name as your congregation “Ebenezer” – “the Son of Help.” What did this mean to your German Lutheran ancestors as well as others who settled in this community? They sensed their need of the LORD if they were to gain the victory over the temptations and trials they faced then and would be facing in the future. They knew their sinful condition and their need of the salvation won by the Savior Jesus Christ. They knew they needed to gather as church and have the ministry of Word and Sacrament that Christ had established to bring them victory over the Philistines of sin, death and the devil. They knew that the only help available to rescue them from the hell they deserved on account of their sins was that pointed to by the Psalmist of old: “I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon me; Thou art my help...” (Ps. 40:17). And with strong faith they prayed for the LORD’S help in establishing a Lutheran congregation; one that would be faithful to God’s Word and to the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of that Word. They prayed and worked in a spirit of true repentance over their sins and with firm faith in Jesus Christ who had already won the victory over sin, death and hell for them through his vicarious death and mighty resurrection from the dead. And in 1846 the people assembled with joy to form what they at first called “The Evangelical Lutheran Protestant Church” at Johannesberg. At first meeting in a log house which is still standing on the property of Harvey and Esther Hoemann. In 1849, with God’s blessing, the congregation reorganized and renamed themselves “Ebenezer Lutheran Church” in 1849. They chose this new name as a confession and one of thanksgiving for they knew that the LORD was the help and had kept the small congregation in His watchful care. And in 1868, driven by the desire to be faithful to their Lutheran confession of faith and to be a part of a Synod that maintained that confession, the congregation joined their Saxon kinsman in the body of which they are now in fellowship--“The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.” This step has proven to be a wonderful blessing to the people and community the congregation has served over these many generations.

Down through the years God has provided for the congregation’s needs—providing faithful pastors, teachers and lay leaders who have remained firm in God’s Word and the Lutheran Confessions. And now in 2011, 165 years later, “The Stone of Help” congregation remains in its mission and ministry, committed to the Great Commission and outreach into the community with the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ. “Hitherto” the Lord has helped you through all the circumstances of your history; of known and unknown problems and challenges! Yes, indeed, “hitherto” you have witnessed God’s blessings through these years that have led you to be a blessing to your community!

Let us note that more recent translations of the Bible have translated the King James’ “Hitherto” with an “Until now.” “Until now the Lord has helped us.” That “until now” leaves us kind of hanging. I like the “hitherto” better because it is the word of a mighty faith. The “hitherto” attached to “the Stone of Help” carries the connotation of certain hope for the future. The “hitherto” has a depth of meaning within in. It is an old English

word that points not only to the past and the present moment but leans forward as a word that sees the future in the past. The memories of the past blessings we commemorate today radiates light upon the future for this congregation of the Lord. The “hitherto”, if you will, carries another old English word--a “henceforth”-- wrapped up in it.

As your congregation remains faithful to God’s Word and in the use of his Sacraments; as you continue to reach out for the souls who are still without Christ and hope in the world, the “henceforth” will carry you into a future full of God’s blessings. The Lord who has helped you “hitherto” promises to be with you “henceforth.” So move forward with that firm faith and solid hope that God will continue to provide his aid and help as you continue your mission to strengthen one another in the true faith and to reach out in love with the Gospel by which “his kingdom comes” and his will is “done on earth as it is in heaven.” The “hitherto” and “henceforth” words have clinging to them that ancient promise God uttered through the prophet Isaiah: “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please and prosper in the thing whereunto I send it.” (Isaiah 55:11)

What God has promised, he will fulfill as your pastor and you as a congregation continue to faithfully proclaim God’s law and gospel, and his whole counsel revealed in His Word of truth! Each time that you see the stone in front of your church building may it be a reminder of our LORD who is with you as your helper at all times.

In closing allow me to share a summary poem I penned for this occasion:

The Lord has helped you **hitherto**
By his great help and blessing,
His help will come e’en **henceforth**,
With mercy unsurpassing.

Look with firm faith upon that stone
That brings you to remember,
That our Savior has provided,
His love so great and tender.

Amen!