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ARCHIVES

SERMON NOTES FOR THE EBENEZER FESTIVAL SERVICE

2 CORINTHIANS 8:8-15

[NOTE: The following sermon study is offered as an aid to pastors of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as they prepare for the special Dec. 31 Ebenezer service.]

I. *Text and Occasion*

The Sunday after Christmas, the last Sunday in the year, has been selected for a final and special celebration of Ebenezer. The text, 2 Cor. 8:8-15, with its accent on the grace of the Incarnation and the grace of giving, serves both the church year and the specific occasion. The mood of the service is to be one of pure thanksgiving coupled with the awareness that Ebenezer is still unfinished. The Propers chosen for the occasion are those for A Day of General or Special Thanksgiving (*LH*, p. 85). Introit, "Praise ye the Lord"; *Collect*, "Give us, we pray Thee, Thy Holy Spirit that we may heartily acknowledge Thy goodness toward us, give thanks for all Thy benefits, and serve Thee in willing obedience"; *Epistle* (1 Tim. 2:1-8), "... giving of thanks be made for all men"; *Gradual*, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits"; *Gospel* (Luke 17:11-19), "Was no one found to give praise except this foreigner?" The suggested hymns (*LH* 33, 36, 123) also elicit a grateful response. Thus the sermon breaks into the song of thanksgiving as a vibrant call to the practice of love. It is a potent reminder that thanksgiving must walk the ground where Christ came and where people are in need. It transfers a thankoffering into a need-offering. It joins the grace of the Incarnation (Christmas) with the grace of giving (Ebenezer). Glory to God for both graces!

II. *Background of Text*

The text is part of a larger section, 2 Cor. 8:1—9:15, dealing with the offering for the relief of the church in Jerusalem. Not only is the offering of great humanitarian concern for St. Paul (Gal. 2:1-10; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; Rom. 15:25-27), but it also shows his interest in a closer bond between Gentile and Jewish churches. Ebenezer, besides filling the needs of the church's mission, also has potential for strengthening bonds between giver and receiver! The Corinthian church has begun the offering but is lagging behind, possibly because of a rift between St. Paul and the Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:1-4) or because they are trapped by their own affluence, "your abundance" (2 Cor. 8:14). My problem is my prosperity! St. Paul urges the Corinthians to finish the job: (a) the Macedonians are set up as an example, who out of "their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part . . . begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints"; (b) the service of Titus is offered; (c) the Corinthians are praised for their God-given qualities, "you excel in everything—in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in your love for us" (2 Cor. 8:1-7). Then alluding to the offering, "See that you excel in this gracious work also (ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ χάριτι). The grace of God works (2 Cor. 8:1). Get on with the job!"

III. *Comments on the Text*

Verse 8: "I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine." St. Paul offers no apostolic command. The Corinthians already excel in love (ἀγάπη). Since the practice of love is not motivated by outward compulsion, St. Paul simply coaxes them "with affectionate diplomacy" (Hughes). He desires to test

(δοκιμάζω) the genuineness (γνήσιος) of their love by comparison with the eagerness (σπουδή) of others, namely the Macedonians, confident in the working grace of God to prove their love genuine (2 Cor. 8:1-5). No specific amount of offering is noted; it is the spirit and motive that is legitimate ground for comparison and testing, and for which one is held accountable. Models of sacrificial giving for Ebenezer provide similar incentive for lagging spirits! (Matt. 5:16)

Verse 9: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich." "You know" (γινώσκετε), a reality already experienced. St. Paul had patiently taught them the mystery and meaning of the Incarnation. "Grace" (χάρις), "unmerited, spontaneous love" (Hughes); God who "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4); God in self-giving action for people (Titus 2:11-14); God involved in humanity, "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Grace finds its highest expression in the Incarnation, the self-impoorishing of "our Lord Jesus." (ἐπτώχευσεν, aorist). "Nowhere to lay His head." (Matt. 8:20)

"He the first-begotten before every creature, through whom all things visible and invisible were created, and in whom all things consist (Col. 1:15ff., Jn. 1:1ff.), He whose was the ineffable divine glory before the world was and from all eternity (Jn. 17:5, Heb. 1:3), He who is one with the Father by His incarnation, assuming the role of a servant, and becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:6ff.). From highest heaven He descended to Calvary and the grave. None was richer than He; none became poorer than He. (Hughes)

Incarnation more than an example of grace. It is "for your sakes" (δι' ὑμᾶς), emphatic position. The redemption procured by Christ "is a very personalized, individual affair. Christ took the poverty of every individual sinner upon Himself and with His grace bought back and brought back the riches of

heaven for every individual sinner" (Meyer). Christ's poverty (ἐκείνου πτωχεία) spells our riches (πλουτήσητε, aorist). A great exchange indeed! (LH 97, 105). Radical reversal of the situation. "All things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:21-23). The Incarnation "walks the ground, never just a theological concept but always concerned with life" (Moule). In Phil. 2 it fosters unity; in 2 Cor. 8 it encourages self-giving. "If He did all this for me, then nothing I give or do for Him can be too much" (Hughes). "Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift" (2 Cor. 9:15). Heartbeat of motivation for Ebenezer!

Verses 10, 11, 12. "And in this matter I give my advice: it is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not." The spirit of love can be tested. The practical direction of the doing of love is a matter of careful personal advice (γνώμη). "Best for you" (συμφέρει), training in consistency and thoroughness reflect benefit. Completion of plans generates maturity. The offering was initiated (τὸ ποιῆσαι) with readiness (τὸ θέλειν), an eagerness still latent. Same kind of readiness by which God desired (θέλει) to save all men and Christ offered Himself as ransom (1 Tim. 2:4-6). God brought His plan to completion. "It is finished." So should the Corinthians (ἐπιτελέσατε). Their readiness (προθυμία), which is plainly evident (πρόκειται, cf. 1 Cor. 16:2), should be matched by the completion of the project. God does not expect the impossible. One gives only out of what he has (ἐκ τοῦ ἔχειν). Every man according to his own ability. God never asks for that which is not first given. Not the amount of the offering but the readiness counts. Accent on earnestness, genuineness, willingness, readiness! "First they gave themselves to the Lord and

to us" (2 Cor. 8:5). "Serve Thee in willing obedience" (Collect). "God does not measure the value of a gift by its size but by the genuineness of the *προθυμία*" (Meyer). Purpose of Ebenezer is not only to supply money for the mission of the church, but to cultivate the grace of readiness by pondering the self-giving grace of God in our personal creation, redemption, sanctification. When readiness is evident, we can be "coaxed" to give to Ebenezer according to our means and bring the thankoffering (need-offering) to a successful completion.

Verses 13, 14, 15: "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, 'He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.'" St. Paul has appealed to the grace of God (8:1), the example of liberality (8:2), fellowship (8:4), the self-giving of God in the Incarnation (8:9). Now he presents God's principle of equality (*ισότης*) as the final factor for the completion of the offering. Idea of equality offered more as a statement of promise than motivation. God is in charge, supplies every need. No need for some to be eased and others burdened! Co-workers with God in the equitable distribution of His gifts. Two interpretations of the principle of equality: (a) the material offerings by the Corinthians will result in present spiritual edification and will bring prayers of gratitude and intercession from the Jerusalem church (Meyer); (b) the "abundance" of the Corinthians should be extended to the needy saints in Jerusalem because there will come a time when the tables are turned. In God's plan balance will be restored (Hughes). The latter view seems the most natural and is supported by the reference to Ex. 16:18. When the Israelites gathered manna, there was balance, equality. Hoarders

found the manna went bad. Likewise, the hoarding of God's gifts today. Gifts are to be shared with an awareness that sooner or later the situation may be reversed. Who will speak the Word to my children in the next century? Who will love them when I am gone? Perhaps in God's plan those to whom our Ebenezer gifts are given now. Do not fear to impoverish yourself for others. God is a God of equality and will balance things out. "Your heavenly Father knows." (Matt. 6:25-34)

IV. *Strategy of the Sermon*

The point of the sermon is that the hearer respond to Ebenezer with thankfulness (thankoffering) and self-giving (need-offering). He is to *say* and *do* Ebenezer. The offering begun should be brought to a joyful completion. The problem is that the hearer is trapped in his own affluence and indifference, does not understand the purpose of Ebenezer, is "tired" of Gospel demands, lacks faith. The power is in the magnificent grace of the Incarnation, "though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich," joined with an understanding of the purpose of Ebenezer, the example of others, and an appreciation of "equality" in God's design. The preacher will help the hearer to confront the will and love of God in terms of attitude and response toward self-giving, and with "affectionate diplomacy" will implore him to prove the genuineness of his love through the Ebenezer Thankoffering. Throughout the sermon the mood will be one of optimism, joyful confidence in the grace of God working in and among His people.

V. *Sample Outlines*

Will You Do Ebenezer?

I. *We Have Begun.*

A. The Corinthians urged to complete their offering.

B. Our Synod's resolution to undertake a thankoffering. New York reiterations.

C. The variety of urgent needs that the offering will help supply.

II. *Let's Finish.*

A. The materialism, misunderstanding, and unfaith that hinder us.

B. God tests the genuineness of love and the readiness for service.

C. Let each one give only according to his ability.

III. *God Gives Grace.*

A. The grace of the Incarnation a great exchange indeed.

B. The grace working in others setting us examples.

C. The grace of equality in God's care for His creation.

A Grace for All Seasons

I. *The Grace of the Incarnation*

II. *The Grace of Thanksgiving*

III. *The Grace of Self-giving*

Ebenezer Everywhere

I. *In Bethlehem*

II. *In Corinth*

III. *In the Synod*

IV. *Some Ideas for Amplification*

Sharing Gifts of Grace

I. *What Kind of Gifts Do We Have?*

II. *Where Is the Need?*

III. *How Much Dare We Give Up?*

IV. *Some Ideas for Amplification*

Detroit convention, 1965. "... that out of gratitude to God for His manifold blessings, and enabled by His Holy Spirit and motivated by the love of Christ, we strive earnestly to bring a special thankoffering to the Lord in the amount of \$40 million."

New York convention, 1967. "... that we urge each member of every congregation to ask God to give him the grace to become personally committed to our mutual task so as to afford everyone the opportunity to bring his thankoffering to the Lord ... that we all pledge ourselves with God's help to do all in our power to bring our mutual effort to a conclusion pleasing to Him."

Unbelievable but True. During the depression in the 1930s members gave 5.6% of their income; during 1965, 2.8%.

Overseas Needs. Forty-nine overseas educational units have been requested from Ebenezer funds.

Ebenezer and People. Ebenezer is an investment in people: future pastors and teachers, persons in the inner city, students on campuses, the deaf, people who have recently become literate but have only communist literature to read, the sick in African and Asian hospitals.

Toward the Future. I often walk into the bedroom and look at my sleeping children and then ask, "When they are grown, who will preach the Word of God to them? Who will teach my children's children?"

Missionary Spirit. Thankofferings from overseas missionaries average about \$250 per family.

Models. Teen-age girl puts away 20 percent of baby-sitting money for Ebenezer. Wife takes part-time job and gives earnings to Ebenezer. "On May 3, 1967, I will be 33 years old. When my Lord was 33, He went to the cross for me. All I have to do is walk to the mailbox to thank Him. And that, God willing, will be an unforgettable trip" (enclosed in the letter, 100 shares of stock). Aged Christian set aside \$98 to be sent to Ebenezer on her birthday, found with a note among her personal effects. ("The Widow's Might"; *LWR*, July 2, 1967).

Mission Affirmations. The church is Christ's mission ... to the whole world ...

to the church . . . to the whole society . . . to the whole man . . . the whole church is Christ's mission.

Money. Money represents many things. In the life of the church money is one way by which God's people show their love and trust. Money can also be translated into many good things that make it possible for the work of the church to go on.

Willingness. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from Thee, and of Thy own have we given thee. . . . Keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of Thy people, and direct their hearts toward Thee." (1 Chron. 29:14-18) ". . . this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had." (Luke 21:3-4)

Doing Ebenezer. Projects to enable individual Christians to bring special Ebenezer gifts which have been reported include: paper routes, hog raising, secretarial work, prizes from county fair, selling greeting cards, pastoral honoraria, sale of personal paintings and ceramics, safe truck driving award, wedding rings, proceeds from berry garden, one day labor per week at Ebenezer Headquarters, 86 mission calls for 86 years of life.

On with the Job. "When the tragic January fire in the Apollo capsule killed three key astronauts destined to make the moon flight in 1970, hope for reaching the goal according to the original timetable had been shattered and there was much blaming of grossly inefficient management, shoddy engineering, and inadequate safety precautions. But in spite of the tragedy and the apparent delay in the moon program, NASA has taken steps to catch up in its timetable for sending men to the moon. The weaknesses in engineering have been corrected. An Apollo team, headed by Wally Schirra, is involved in intensive training. Spirits are again high,

and it is all systems 'go' for the moon in 1970. Alan Shepherd, first U.S. Astronaut to fly in space, summed up the situation in these words: '*The time for recrimination is over. There is much to be done. Let's get on with the job.*'" (Iowa East Bulletin)

Luther Quotes: "It is clear that a sacrifice must consist of praise and thanks, or must at least not be without praise and thanks, if it is to please God. And if it is without praise and thanks, He neither wants it nor likes it." "It is not for angels to be proud of Christ's incarnation, for Christ did not assume an angelic but a human nature. Therefore, it would not be a surprise if the angels looked at us with envy in their eyes because we human beings, creatures far inferior to them and sinners besides, are placed above them into an honor so high and great. They worship Christ, who has become our Brother, our flesh and blood; and yet they are not envious but gladly grant us the honor and are sincerely pleased by the fact that Christ is our Brother. They marvel at the human nature in Christ; and yet the honor and glory are not theirs but ours. And we human beings are unable to rejoice and be proud of it. . . . Is not this a great pity? Accursed of God be this wretched unbelief." — "Welcome to earth, Thou noble Guest, Through whom the sinful world is blest! Thou com'st to share my misery; What thanks shall I return to thee?" (Plass, *What Luther Says*)

Concern Now. "In 1945 Pastor Martin Niemöller wrote of his experience in Germany: 'The Nazis came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I was a Protestant so I did not speak up. Then they came for ME. By that time there was no one to speak up for anyone.'" (*Pulpit*, Nov. 1967)

God's Interruptions. "We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions. We may pass them by, preoccupied with our more important tasks, as the priest passed by the man who had fallen among thieves — perhaps reading the Bible. When we do that we pass by the visible sign of the Cross raised athwart our path to show us that not our way but God's way must be done." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

Most of the ideas have been taken from Ebenezer materials; "Ebenezer Bulletin Inserts," "Will They Say Ebenezer?" "To Help You Walk Through 'Will They say Ebenezer' with Your Fellow-Christians," "Speaking to the Heart." For listing of specific projects see "Will They Say Ebenezer?" Additional sermon helps on Ebenezer: *CTM*, Jan. 1967, 1 Sam. 7:2-14; "Speaking to the Heart," Aug. 18, 1967, 2 Cor. 9:7-15 and Ps. 107:22.

VII. Sources

Moule, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*; Meyer, *Ministers of Christ*; Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*.

St. Louis, Mo. LESTER E. ZEITLER

AN EPIPHANY CHANCEL DRAMA

MATT. 2:1-12

[NOTE: We present here the second in our series of new patterns and types of sermons. The chancel drama is used as the vehicle of the Word in this example. Young people have found chancel dramas particularly effective, both because they are involved in its production and because the dramatic form has a strong appeal for them. Because the chancel drama works with few or no props and scenery, it can be presented almost anywhere. This one has a particular appeal for children, for they find themselves involved in some of the dialog.]

The Three Kings

Setting: The chancel area. A gold crown to be worn by the pastor. Three objects to depict the gifts: a money bag of gold, a small chest, and a vial. A scroll that can be unrolled. In the center of the chancel there may be a crib.

The three legendary kings, Melchior, Balthasar, and Caspar step into our moment with their story of the King. The overpowering glory of God in Jesus Christ demands a response, even from kings. It demands not only a joyous confession of acknowledgment of Christ as the Son of God, but a tangible gift significant for the occasion of the King's entrance into the world. All men are called to worship the king — Jesus Christ — Son of God.

The drama moves slowly and deliberately. Moments of silence afford opportunity for the changes of character position in the chancel. Since the pastor plays all three roles, he must make definite tonal changes for each king. After reading the text from the pulpit, the pastor places the crown on his head and moves to stage right for the introduction of the three kings.

Melchior: {stage right — deep bow} I am Melchior, king of Persia.

Balthasar: {stage center — deep bow} I am Balthasar, king of Arabia.

Caspar: {stage left — deep bow} I am Caspar, king of India.

Caspar: {pointing high into the chancel} "We three kings of Orient are; Bearing gifts, we traverse afar, Field and fountain, moor and mountain, Following yonder star.

{Facing the altar in prayer — hands together and bowing} O star of wonder, star of night, Star with royal beauty bright, Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect Light."

{Facing congregation} We have been called wise men, kings, magi. You might say we are all of these. Until we met on the

outskirts of Jerusalem, the place to which the star had led us, we knew not one another. Each one of us had been guided by the Spirit to glorify the King whom God would make known.

We three kings—each from a kingdom of his own—each a king in his own right—each one of us ruled a kingdom flourishing with those things God had created and preserved, material things such as gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now there was to be a King of kings—not chosen among the princes and rulers of the world, but sent by God in the incarnation of His Son. He would be not a mighty general, not a political orator, not a popular person among the people, but a simple child, born an infant mild. To this Child, this Son of God, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost and was born of the Virgin Mary, to Him we came to kneel in adoration.

We three were wise men, wise because of our learning, our study, our interest in seeking truth. We were not of God's chosen people. We did not worship God as the children of Israel did. Each of us had his own religion. In our studies, we had copies of the Jewish Scriptures. These writings were different from others we knew. The God of the Jews was concerned about His people. He conversed with them, guided them, prepared them for a great event, an event in which that Word would become flesh.

Many among His own people did not recognize the King of kings when He came to them. It was then that God revealed Him as the Light of the world also to us Gentiles—even though we had not been connected with God through His mighty acts in the Old Testament. How gracious God is to us! And how tragic it is that those to whom God reveals His glory often fail to recognize Him. O you Christians today, who have God's glory made known to you in such richness in Word and sacrament, must you be so

blind that even the world can be more conscious of His shaping of history than you?

Old Testament writers had actually looked forward with longing to a day when Gentile kings like us would come to Jerusalem with royal tribute. Listen: (*unrolls the scroll*) "Because of thy temple at Jerusalem kings bear gifts to thee."—Ps. 68:29. "May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him."—Ps. 72:10. "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."—Is. 60:3.

These Messianic expectations were known. We three magi were men of astrology who studied the stars, scanned the heavens. There was much talk about a special star that should announce a special birth. The more this star was talked about, the more its fame increased. On a hill in India there was an observatory kept by 12 men whose sole duty was to watch for that star.

On that glorious night when all was still in Bethlehem, the star appeared. We three saw the star. It revealed to us that the King had come! It was for us the announcement of the birth of Him who was revealed to the shepherds who heard the angels singing, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

I, King Caspar of India, didn't sleep a wink. On the next day I gathered my cortege and without stopping followed the star to seek Him.

Balthasar: (*stage center*) I am Balthasar, king of Arabia, that desert wasteland from which in your day men have brought forth oil out of the ground. Our nomadic peoples were keepers of sheep and traders. We guided merchants from oasis to oasis through blinding sand storms. All our days were spent moving "things" around. They were nothing special, those days—for we did nothing special with those "things."

I am the king, a wise man, one of the

magi. I saw the star and began the journey, led by the guiding star. The camels that had carried the wares of merchants now carried me to see Him whom God had made known.

Your children would probably enjoy a camel ride. But my camel was a special one. It was special because of the way I used it. It would take me to the manger stall. Look at your automobile today; in our language it has real camel power. Your auto is special. It is your vehicle which brings you to God's house to worship Him. Your car today, your money, your mind—all these things can be special if you use them for the King, Jesus Christ.

Nothing stopped us. We ate while moving. Little things that cause some today to stay at home on Sunday morning—we never gave them a second thought. To Bethlehem—follow the star—behold the great event of history! That was our special reason for living. We made everything in our lives bend to that purpose.

I, Balthasar, king of Arabia, ask you to join me as we follow the star.

Melchior: *{stage right}* I am Melchior, king of Persia. I too saw the star in the West and hastened in its direction. Outside Jerusalem the star could not be seen. For the first time I met Caspar and Balthasar. We three kings had come for one and the same thing, guided by the star—to behold the King of kings.

We went into the city. We spoke with Herod the king and his advisers. They knew the Scriptures. They told us that Micah had prophesied of the town of Bethlehem. But what good is it to know the Scriptures and have no faith? Not one of Herod's men came with us. We were jokesters—kings going to worship another king. Ha!

Outside the gates we once again saw the star before us. We were almost there, a few miles to go. The star stood over the home which Joseph had rented after the Passover.

We knocked. Joseph let us in. We scarcely said hello to him, for there He was! Son of God—Jesus Christ—Savior. Speechless! Gentiles we were, and now we were permitted to be among the first to recognize the Messiah of Israel. We were speechless before God's Son. The glory of God filled our hearts—we believed.

Melchior: *{kneeling and placing the gold on the altar or near the crib}* I, Melchior, king of Persia, worship You, O Jesus Christ, Son of God. To You I bring a gift of gold to symbolize that You are King of kings. I have no greater gift to bring—but Your worth is more than can ever be acknowledged by the gold of a king. Accept, then, the love which prompts my gift.

Balthasar: *{kneeling with his gift in a small chest}* I, Balthasar, king of Arabia, worship You, O Jesus Christ, Son of God. On bended knee I bring the most precious gift of my land. Before You I place frankincense that is burned on altars. Until now we have never known how much we owe to the God of all the earth. Now we believe You to be the Son of God. This incense is to remind the world of Your divine majesty, but even more, to remind men that now they can know of the love of God, who saves His world, and knowing, can love Him, too.

Caspar: *{kneeling with his vial}* I, Caspar, king of India, worship You, O Jesus Christ, Son of God. In this small vial I bring my gift of myrrh, the ointment we use at the time of burial. This myrrh is for You, who are destined to die and be buried—but then to rise again for the salvation of men.

{Facing congregation with arms uplifted} "Glorious now behold Him arise, King and God and Sacrifice. Alleluia, Alleluia, Earth to the heav'ns replies. O star of wonder, star of night, Star with royal beauty bright, Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect Light." Amen.

Tallmadge, Ohio PETER MEALWITZ