Past is Prologue!
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The book of first Samuel records that after an Israelite victory over the Philistines in which “the Lord thundered with a mighty sound,” the prophet Samuel “took a stone,” set it up, “and called its name Ebenezer.” Samuel said, “Till now the Lord has helped us.” The Hebrew word Eben-Ezer means “stone of help.”

Of course, the most common reference to the word “Ebenezer” is Charles Dickens’s character Ebenezer Scrooge in his classic, A Christmas Carol.

In her book, Hearing the Gospel through Charles Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol” (published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2011 and winner of the Independent Christian Publishers Illumination Award for Bible Study), the Rev. Cheryl Anne Kincaid, a New Jersey Presbyterian Minister, writes: Charles Dickens uses the name Ebenezer with a purpose as well. In the Old Testament, when biblical prophets and the patriarchs passed through a trial, they would set up an altar or a stone of remembrance, to remind themselves how God had led and sustained them through their trials. These stones were called Ebenezer (1 Samuel 7:12) which Scripture define as “the Lord is my help”. These stones were a witness of God’s sustaining power in a believer’s past and His promise in how He would lead them in the future. They were used as a tangible sign of intangible truth that these believers had learned about God’s leading, providence and care.

Memorial Day was established after the Civil War to remember military victories, the sacrifices of fallen soldiers, and God’s ongoing help. (Gen. John A. Logan’s General Order No. 11, establishing Memorial Day, May 5, 1868 is republished in the current Wall Street Journal’s “Notable and Quotable” section).

Because June 6, 2019 is the 75th anniversary of the Allied forces D-Day invasion of Normandy in World War II, this is a special moment to remember. Many D-Day Veterans will be there at Pointe de Hoc on Omaha Beach, in France, perhaps for the last time.

In the United Kingdom, the English equivalent to Memorial Day is called “Remembrance Day.” In my hometown of Kutztown, Pennsylvania, on the other side of the Commonwealth, I was chosen to recite Rudyard Kipling’s poem Recessional one Memorial Day in the mid-1970s. That poem’s refrain, “Lest we Forget, Lest we Forget,” follows odes to the tumult of war.

Lest we forget, we honor the servicemen and women of the past and present this weekend. Each headstone in Arlington National Cemetery, and the 146 other national cemeteries in the U.S. and 24 throughout the world, including the nearby National Cemetery of the Alleghenies, North on I-79, is an Ebenezer stone.

By remembering God’s help in the past, we are emboldened as we continue on life’s pilgrimage. The Rev. Robert Robinson’s 1757 hymn “Come Thy Fount of Every Blessing” expresses this theme with the words:

Here I raise my Ebenezer, Here by Thy great help I’ve come; And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, Safely to arrive at home.

In the midst of the great depression in 1934 and 1935, a gigantic piece of Indiana limestone was subdivided into four immense stones. Due to their size, they were hauled to Washington, D.C. on specially designed flat railroad cars.

Just as Samuel placed his Ebenezer stone—the “stone of help”—to remember the God’s assistance in the past, these large stones were shipped to Washington, D.C. in order to be carved into statues surrounding the United States National Archives which was being constructed. The Archives would house and remember the Founding Documents of American History—the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and Bill of Rights. (The National Archives now also has a permanent exhibit containing an original copy of the English Magna Carta.)

The four 65-ton statues, which counting their bases tower 25 feet from the ground, were carved from the four pieces of the original giant Indiana limestone.
National Archives historian Jessie Krantz, with whom Waynesburg University’s Stover Scholars met in March, for the second time, has described the two sculptures on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the building—“Future” and “Past,” designed by Robert Aiken and assisted by sculptor Attilio Piccirilli:

Future is youthful woman gazing in contemplation of things to come. She holds an open book symbolizing what has yet to be written. “What is Past is Prologue,” from Shakespeare’s Tempest, is written on the base.
The carvings around the base represent arts and sciences—books and a lyre, eagles, torches, and swords. There is also an urn symbolizing the past.
In contrast to Future, Past is an old man gazing down the corridors of time. He holds a closed book representing history. The inscription, a paraphrase of Confucius, reads: “Study the Past” (Study the past if you would diviné the future).

The other two statues on the Constitution Avenue side of the Archives are “Guardianship” featuring a muscular man holding a plumed helmet with Thomas Jefferson’s quotation, “Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty” and “Heritage” featuring Athena the Greek Goddess of wisdom with a quote from abolitionist Wendell Phillips, “The heritage of the past is the seed that brings forth the harvest of the future.”

In this period in the Church calendar after Easter, but before Ascension Day and Pentecost, we live in anticipation of the future. The Apostle’s Creed affirms that Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven “and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence he shall come to judge and quick and the dead.” We do not know when that will take place. Responding to this question in Acts 1:7, before his ascension, Jesus said, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”

Yet, that question of timing has captivated Christians often in Church History, with thinkers such as fourth century Bishop Augustine of Hippo in the City of God and twelfth century mystic Joachim of Fiore wrestling with the Bible’s apocalyptic literature, especially the Book of Revelation, and parallel passages in the Old Testament, such as in Ezekiel, Zechariah, and especially Daniel. No other New Testament book has made such an immense contribution to the Church’s liturgy and music, including the “Hallelujah Chorus” in Handel’s Messiah. Although Revelation has been one of the most popular books in the Bible, even in our own age, it has generally not been exegeted from Presbyterian pulpits. It is the only New Testament book about which John Calvin did not write a commentary. Martin Luther said, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to the book.” The fact that the Rev. Dr. Stu Broberg and Executive Presbyter the Rev. Craig Kephart explored Revelation in the past few months at the Church of the Covenant is commendable.

Because my Washington Presbytery colleagues have explored the manifold complexities of the Revelation to John at the island of Patmos, such as the symbolism of seals, letters, beasts, dragons, and trumpets, and so forth, I will skip to the last chapter, the epilogue and conclusion. My confirmation verse is Revelation 22:20: “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!”

The conceptual interplay between past, present, and future is found throughout the Book of Revelation in Jesus Christ’s words, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the End.” Alpha is the first letter and Omega is the last letter of the Greek alphabet. Jesus also states, “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” This statement recalls the Messianic prophecy in Numbers 24:17: “A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” By remembering both God’s past help and that Jesus Christ is and will be with us, we can be assured that our past is the prologue to a bright future.

We will raise more Ebenezer stones in the future!