St. Matthew's Lutheran Church & School – Oconomowoc, WI
Reformation Sunday – Year C
WELS 175 Anniversary Series
Joshua 4:1-9
October 26, 2025

Sermon: Joshua 4:1-9
Christ *with* Us!

They had been through so much. Where do you begin? That's often the reaction when there is so much to process, but a good place to begin is the beginning. So many made the difficult decision to leave their homeland, even leave their families because there wasn't enough money to send the entire family at once. So, the husband would go and when there was enough money the rest of the family would join him. The left for a lot of reasons. Many of them socio-economic due to the reality of turmoil and upheaval in Europe in general and in Germany specifically following the French Revolution and Napoleon's wars. Farmland in the father land made it difficult for fathers to provide for families because there wasn't enough of it to go around. Now they hear about this new land just celebrating its 50th birthday, which in world politics means it still has its diapers on, but it was a country that had more land than they knew what to do with, so they were practically giving it away. You just needed to build a structure on it, promise to farm the land for at least five years and poof 160 acres could be yours. There was a territory called Wisconsin looked a like home in Germany with its endless forests and rolling hills. The land of opportunity like they never had before. Pair that with the religious climate in Europe that told you if you were a Lutheran it didn't matter. You were going to join with others that did not agree with you, because a united front for the kingdom is more important than your Bible beliefs. Separation of church and state did not exist. The Unites States was not only the land of opportunity but the land of freedom. German Lutherans could come here and worship without interference of the government, without worrying if the government was going to shut your church down, without worrying if your pastor was going to get arrested for doing what I am doing right now. So, they came. By the boatloads. By the thousands. For opportunity. For the right to worship and live their faith without the government telling them what they can and can't do. They had been through so much, but God was with them. He didn't lose track of them as they crossed the Atlantic. Now how do you start a church in a new land where pastors are few and far between and people are scattered across the countryside. There would be new challenges, threats, and false teachings, oh my! There was a tug of war between a supply of pastors desperately needed on the frontier and holding to the truth of God's Word. Which one would win that battle? Should that even be a battle? They had been through so much and there was still so much yet to come for those that founded what would later become our church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

They had been through so much. This nation of people was not looking for an opportunity for farmland but to come to the land flowing with milk and honey that God promised them. The Israelites lived through slavery under the whip cracking, back-breaking, work-driving Egyptians to serve them in whatever way was demanded. Moses was called to lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and reluctantly went only when he ran out of excuses to tell God why he made a mistake and shouldn't be the one to go and, in the end, God said, "Go, I am sending you anyway and don't forget your staff." God sent the Ten Plagues as real life object lessons to the Egyptians and his people that he is the one, only true God. Pharaoh finally grants release for the Israelites through his grief-stricken heart for his firstborn only to change his mind and have the biggest army in the world chase the Israelites formerly known as slaves. God shows he's bigger. God splits the waters, and his people cross on dry ground while the superpower army chases them, and God washes them out with the weapon of water. Rescued from that threat the Israelites can only grumble and complain against God over and over like a never-satisfied-four-year-old without a nap. No food! Here's manna every morning. Sick of the food! Here's quail every evening. No water! Here water out of a rock. No water again! Here's water from a rock, again! The Israelites didn't trust God to bring them into the Promised Land when they arrived at the doorstep, so God said, "Fine, this generation doesn't get to enter it," so they wandered in the wilderness for forty years until that generation died off. When it finally was time to go into the land they sent spies to scout it out and they said the people are too strong and numerous, the cities are too fortified. They can't do it. They are too weak. God said, "Go! I am fighting for you, and I will show you with the first victory I give at Jericho when the walls come down with the nonsensical weapon of your vocal cords just to show that I am the One fighting to you and the victory is mine! They had been through so much!

A lot changed for the Israelites over those years. Their circumstances changed. Their complaints against God certainly changed. "We have no food. We don't like the food. We have no water. You just brought us out here to die. The people are too strong. The city walls too thick." They had so many things to focus on to worry and complain about. One thing didn't change through it all. They had been through so much…and God was *with* them! God promised in his grace that he is always with them, and he kept that promise at every moment even when they didn't remember it or didn't

want to remember it! The theme that God repeats to Joshua when God called him to take the place of Moses was, "Be strong and courageous because the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." They had been through so much. Now it was time to step across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. The Israelites had been waiting for this moment for centuries! Listen to what they are commanded to do in this moment. *"So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, 'Go over before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever" (Joshua 4:4-7).* When the Israelites began their journey over forty years ago God was with his people by splitting the waters of the Red Sea and they walked across on dry ground. Now as their journey is finally at the time to cross into and take possession of the Promised Land God once again parts the water and his people cross on dry ground. This time he instructs a man from each tribe, representing the entirety of the nation, to take stone from the Jordan and build a monument where they would camp that evening.

It was a monument to not only what the Lord had done for his people, but that the Lord was with his people. They had been through so much and God is with his people every step of the way. Did you catch God repeating his promise with his people. Remember how the Israelites doubted God they could take the Promised Land, how the people there were too big and strong? God told Joshua to go and be strong and courageous because I am with you. Why were they to build this monument? When the future generation sees it and asks, "Hey mom and dad? What do those stones mean?" you can tell them. First, how could the future generations see the monument they were going to build of the twelve stones? It is only because the Israelites will be successful in taking over the Promised Land just as God promised because he is with his people just as he promises. The future generations will live in the land and see the monument to ask what it means. It wasn't that God was doing something new. That monument showed that God did what he always promised and will continue to do it in the future. That is why God instructs them to build this monument of twelve stones to remember this moment in their history.

They had been through a lot. You have been through a lot. This is one of those Sunday's we don't need to spell it all out, we can see how we are just like the Israelites. The complaining, the questioning, the blaming, the demanding more from God. You know it all and how dark our hearts can be as if God isn't going to do what he said he's going to do, as if he has broken his Word in the past, or that he will in the future. What did God show the Israelites? Despite all that he is with us. God had to spell it out for them with every heavy stone they strained to hoist on their shoulders and carry to the camp that evening to serve as a reminder that God is faithful to his promises and always with us.

God spells it out for us on the cross. You have been through a lot. Christ has been through even more, for you. What are the monuments in your life that serve as those reminders when we forget or don't want to trust? He is with you every step of the way. Despite all our unfaithfulness to him he always remains faithful to us. We live that reality in Christ because of God's grace. We live in that reality of God's forgiveness.

As the German Lutheran immigrants took up their homesteads in a new land there were plenty of challenges to go around and as you study the history of our church body you realize there were numerous times and circumstances where it could have gone off the rails, but it was only by God's grace. If you want to learn more details you can learn more about them in Bible class right now between the services. As you look at each piece of altar furniture you will notice something at the base. Count the stones. Twelve stones around the altar, the ambo, the font. By God's grace and through Christ we are connected to those that have gone before us and to those that will come after us. Connected through Christ. Christ with us, just as he always has been and always will be. Amen.