

Theme: REUNITED AT LAST

- I. With our fellow believers
- II. With God in Jesus

“David my servant will be their prince forever.”

**The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>16</sup> “Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him.’ <sup>17</sup> Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.**

<sup>18</sup> “When your people ask you, ‘Won’t you tell us what you mean by this?’ <sup>19</sup> say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick. I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.’ <sup>20</sup> Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on <sup>21</sup> and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. <sup>22</sup> I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. <sup>23</sup> They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

<sup>24</sup> “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. <sup>25</sup> They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. <sup>26</sup> I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. <sup>27</sup> My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. <sup>28</sup> Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.” (New International Version (NIV)

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People of God,

In 1965, Anna-Mary Barnett dropped her 5-year-old son off with new a babysitter. When she returned to pick Jerry up, neither the babysitter nor her son could be found. The kidnapper took Jerry to another state, then abandoned him. Without records proving his identity, Jerry went into foster care. Years went by. Jerry grew up, started a family. Decades went by. A few years ago, Jerry’s son took a DNA test that matched him to a cousin. In February 2020, Jerry’s son drove him to a reunion including a mob of distant relations. After 55 years of separation, mother and son were REUNITED AT LAST.

On this Saints' Triumphant Sunday, we gather together for a reunion. Not just the reunion of people we saw last week or of some decade-spanning separation. This reunion is much more glorious. The world's greatest, most elaborate celebration can't do justice to this reunion. God's divided people; God's people in heaven and on earth; God and his people; all REUNITED AT LAST!

Our planet has three layers: core, mantle, and crust. No matter how deep you go, it's still planet earth. Sometimes Bible prophecies also have three layers. We can call them past, present, and future. The prophecy in our text today relates to the past, to God's Old Testament people. One layer. Dig a little deeper, the mantle, and it also concerns the present, the New Testament Church. And it goes one further. God's Word for today tells us about the future, the Church triumphant, the saints in heaven. And it all points to a glorious reunion.

God told his prophet Ezekiel to take two sticks, writing on one, "**Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him**" and on the other, "**Belonging to Joseph, that is to Ephraim, and all the Israelites associated with him.**" Then God told Ezekiel to take those sticks and stick them together in his hand.

Ezekiel, the LORD's prophet, stands in for God. The sticks represent a major division among God's people. Two kingdoms. Judah and the descendants of Israel loyal to that tribe, the southern kingdom. The "house of Israel," here referred to as "Joseph" or "Ephraim," the most prominent, powerful tribe of the northern kingdom. Two sticks. Two kingdoms. Divided against each other. Maybe you can relate with all the division in our own country.

But how did God's people get there? If God's people can't get along with each other, what chance do the rest of us have? Maybe you remember from Sunday school God anointed King David to be king over all his people. David's son Solomon came next. Solomon led Israel into unbridled prosperity, but it couldn't last. Solomon's son didn't rule as wisely as his forebears. Most of the people of Israel split off in rebellion for hundreds of years. Kingdom against kingdom, and people against God.

Are you happy with the way the election turned out this year? I don't ask to sprinkle lemon juice on a wound or swell your chest with pride; no matter which side, if either, you fall into, many people here think differently. In our country, that's no rebellion. But it is an opportunity that our shared enemy—the devil—can and will exploit to destroy the unity we have as God's people. So how do we keep that unity? First, we listen to God's Word. God promises restored unity to his people.

God's people rebelled against his chosen kings, and, more importantly, against him. Sure, political alliances separated them. Sometimes, they warred against each other. Two sticks, two kingdoms. Yet they shared much in common. Common ancestry. Common God. Common sin. Against God. Against one another. Their animosity separated them from each other. Their idolatry and sin separated them from God. Their sin defiled the land so much God sent them away. Not to boarding school, either. By the time Ezekiel spoke this prophecy, Israel, the northern kingdom, Joseph's stick, had been away from home about 150 years. Think of all the generations in America since the Civil War. The Israelite's children's children, for several generations, knew only captivity. In all likelihood, they accustomed themselves to life there. Probably many of them didn't even know they were Israelites. A forgotten people, abandoned to some corner of the history books.

Then there's Judah. Judah fell into the same sins as her sister-tribes, but Judah still claimed to worship the LORD. Judah knew better and sinned anyway. God sent Judah into exile, too. Ezekiel spoke these words in Babylon. God said he was taking the stick of Joseph and the stick of Judah. They would become one in his hand. He would send them back to their own land. In other words, he would do it: REUNITED AT LAST!

So what does that have to do with you and me? Have you fostered unity and peace your whole life? When we speak disparagingly of our leaders—whether they agree with us or not; you are free to disagree—we aren't fostering unity. Our words put us at odds with the authorities God has put in place for

our good. Too political? Try the home. I'm not fostering family unity when I say *those* words to my wife. All the while I've been in rebellion against God for bowing down to the idols in my life—sex, screen, security, self, stomach, and so on. God is right to remove us not from our country but from this planet. Death fits the crimes we've committed.

As God promised to REUNITE Judah and Joseph AT LAST, he comes for us. He promised his Old Testament people they would reunite under one king. Two sticks into one. Two kingdoms into one. Back home. Past. First layer. But did you know that the northern kingdom, sent into exile, never returned to **“the mountains of Israel”**? Lost to the pages of history. So we move into another layer. The present.

God did send his people Judah back to their land. God REUNITED them to their own land, keeping his promise. One king for all his people. The king Ezekiel describes as **“the prince.”** Not to be confused with the artist formerly known as some strange symbol, God describes this prince with careful attention to detail. **“One king over all of them.”** Not one ring to rule them all; one king. God calls him **“my servant David.”** On one level, it looks like God is giving his stamp of approval to David's descendants as kings. Except none of them ever took the throne in Jerusalem again. Except one.

**“My servant David will be king over them, and they will have one shepherd....My servant David will be their prince forever.”** David died 450 years before Ezekiel. This shepherd-king has to rule forever. Jesus, God's chosen prince, lead's God's sheep to a joyful reunion. Jesus, God and man united in one, had power to reunite God and man. As our substitute, he brought peace and unity to sides at war with one another. Man against man. Jew against Gentile. As our Savior, he sacrificed himself to provide a divine ceasefire between warring factions.

11 am. November 11, 1918. A small town in France. Military leaders from warring nations declare an armistice, a ceasefire between world powers. That first Armistice Day jumpstarted the end of the First World War. They called it the “war to end all wars.” The very fact that we still celebrate Veterans' Day on November 11th tells you we didn't end all wars. Yet that day, the joy was great They set hostilities aside for the prospect of peace.

Jesus is our armistice or our **“everlasting covenant of peace.”** Our sin separated us from God. Jesus bridged the gap by coming down to us, being one of us, living for us, breathing for us, dying for us. His death on the cross declared the truce between God and his people, between God's people and one another. Jesus gave us true unity, fellowship with God and with one another! Jesus gives us true peace, peace of heart. Knowing no matter how bad the world gets, our prince still reigns! We will never be separated from him again because the love of God won. It ceased hostilities. Jesus, our prince, our leader, REUNITED US to God AT LAST! We have this unity now. Right now he is our God. We are his people right now.

Ever get the feeling, though, that every time you take a step forward, you end up taking one or two backwards, too? Jesus won our peace. Jesus REUNITED US to God AT LAST. But then why do I keep going back to the sins that separate me from God? God calls that **“sinful backsliding.”** We keep going back, like children keep going back to the mud they know will get them dirty. And our loving Father still does what he says. We defile ourselves with our sinful backsliding. God saves us. He himself cleanses us. He took us and washed us with our baptism, liberally applying Jesus to the filth of our sin. Not a spot remains. Pure children, we are now set free to live for God here on earth.

Then there's the future, another layer. God promised to return his Old Testament people to the mountains of Israel. He promised them they and their children's children would live there forever. Not long after Jesus, the Israelites were removed from the land. But the Israelites no longer comprise God's people. That is, God's people is not the physical descendants of Israel or Judah. God's people live across the globe, and we look forward to a greater promised land.

Since Jesus REUNITED us to God AT LAST, we look forward to our final reunion with God. God promises there our sin will be down for the count. We'll all live in complete unity because we'll all

do right, do everything God says. **“They will no longer defile themselves. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees.”** Can you imagine what life will be like when our enemies sin and the devil are finally buried in their final resting place?

It gets better. For our reunion God promises kill death itself. Death, that punishment earned by sins that separate us from God, has through the cross of Christ become the bridge from this life to eternity for all who believe. God’s reunion won’t just join us to Old Testament Israel, but all those lost to history and committed to memory who died trusting in Jesus. Grandma and grandpa. Mom and dad. The friends death robbed us of far too young. The children God took from us. They’ll be there, and we will be REUNITED AT LAST! Saints triumphant, a radiant people basking in the light of our victorious King!

That’s the best part of all. **“David my servant will be their prince forever...I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”** The best part of heaven is, AT LAST, we will be REUNITED face to face with our Redeemer-God. Jesus will be with us forever. The REUNION of the ages, the union we were created for. God’s people, restored to be with their God in perfect unity forever.

After 55 years, mother and son were reunited. Who knows how long we will have to wait to be reunited with our loved ones who have died in the Lord? Could be 5 years. Could be 55. But when we are REUNITED AT LAST, we will be with Jesus. We look forward to living in perfect unity in heaven. Keep that unity now. How? Look to the past. Jesus reunited us to God. Live in the present. Enjoy the fellowship we have on earth—unity around the Word of God. Look forward to the future. Perfect unity. With God and his people. In heaven, we will be REUNITED AT LAST! Amen.

“My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.”