

Text: Joshua 4:1-9. 14th Sunday after Pentecost. **September 14, 2014.**

Grace and peace to all God's people. Amen.

Do you ever wonder, "Are we still God's people?" Every new law that's passed seems opposed to God's Word. Every Christian parent has at least one child that has fallen away. "I thought I brought them up right. I thought I trained a child in the way he should go." Then why did they fall away? I'm so excited to bring my children to church so they can learn about Jesus, but when we come I spend all my time chasing them around and walking to the bathroom that I couldn't tell you one single thing from the entire service. When I go back to mom and dad's church this place that used to be packed is now about half empty. Maybe God's not really with us anymore. Maybe there is no hope for the next generation. Are we still God's people?

The people of Israel were likely wondering the same thing. The people had heard God's promises, "I will give you a land flowing with milk and honey." But almost 500 years later, they were still wandering around in a barren wilderness. They had heard stories of this great prophet Moses, a man who received God's commands face to face, a man whose face glowed with radiance from being in the presence of the LORD. Maybe some of the people had seen Moses when they little, but that seemed like a fairy tale now. And Moses was gone. Dead. So was his brother Aaron, the guys who had done these awesome plagues in Egypt and taken down the world's great superpower. But now, here they stood, about two million people with no trained army, about to enter a land filled with literal giants. How will we do it? And then, there's the guilt factor. My parents grumbled against Moses. And like father, like son, I'm a chip off the old block. I love the LORD, but I'm not so sure about entering Canaan. The cities are huge. The walls are thick. The people aren't just going to relocate for a few slaves who've been aimlessly meandering. Maybe we aren't God's people. At least, I certainly don't deserve to be.

How can I know? How can I be sure? What sign will the LORD give? How about piling up the waters of the greatest river in the area? During flood stage? Ten miles upstream? Creating ground that is completely dry, in the middle of a riverbed, wide enough for two million people to cross over, with all their possessions and children and flocks and herds, in one day? Would that be enough? Would that convince you, "We are still God's people"? Maybe you didn't catch all the details, and we are kind of jumping in to the middle of a larger account here. The LORD cut off the waters of Jordan. During flood stage. Ten miles, ten miles upstream. The riverbed was completely dry. And two million people crossed on dry ground in one day. Two million people, with unpredictable children and animals, all crossed over in one day.

And that was not the greatest sign. All that was not the greatest assurance, "We are God's people." The LORD himself stood right in the middle of the people. Right where the priests were standing, right there, at that exact spot, was the ark of the covenant of the LORD. Now for us, the ark is the subject of movies and maybe a good luck relic of a day gone by. But for these people, at this spot, at this time, the ark of the covenant of the LORD was the place where the LORD chose to put his glory. Where the ark was, there God was, with all his power, more importantly, with all his forgiving love.

The priests were the first to cross over and as soon as their feet touched the water's edge, the water stopped flowing and piled up in a heap, those ten miles upstream. And the priests walked to the middle of the river and they stood there, holding the poles that held the ark on their shoulders. Now when the ark was carried, there was a special covering over the top. Except for one person one day a year, no one could look at the ark and live just as no one can look at God and live. But still. This was as close to the ark as anybody was ever going to get. This was as close to the LORD as anybody was ever going to get.

Now try to picture these people crossing the river, watching the priests who are holding the ark and faithfully standing in the middle of the riverbed. I can picture many people scurrying across just wanting to get safely to the other side. But can you picture a faithful father slowing down as he passes the priests, stopping to look at the ark, swallowing a deep swallow and thinking, "This is the best moment of my earthly life. This is as close as I will ever get to the ark."? Can you picture a six-year old child, with a six-year old curiosity, walking by the ark asking, "Mom, what's that? Why are those guys standing there? What are they holding? Where are we going?" And in a movie perfect scene, with a tear rolling down her eye, mom says, "Jacob, that's the LORD. We are going to the promised land. We are still his people. We are still his people." We are still the LORD's people!

This was a special day, seared, sealed, imprinted on the minds of God's people. God made sure they would never forget that day. Never. He had twelve men, not priests, but laypeople, one from each of the twelve tribes, go back into the riverbed they had just crossed and pull out one stone, large enough and weighty enough for the occasion. Then, they were to carry these stones on their shoulders, just as the priests had carried the ark on their shoulders. They set them down at their camp and eventually built a monument, a memorial to never forget this day. There's some cool symbolism here. Twelve is God's number for the church throughout the Bible. Twelve is the number for God's people. God's people are compared to stones, living stones, in other places in

the Bible. Twelve stones. The people of the church. God's people. We are still God's people! This monument would make sure we never forget.

Meanwhile, Joshua was busy in the river, at the exact spot where the priests were standing. Joshua himself was building another monument of another twelve stones to commemorate the exact location where the priests had faithfully stood, courageously obeying the LORD's command, fearlessly standing in the middle of a river during flood stage. Yes. There were actually two piles of twelve stones each. It might be tough to tell that from just a quick reading of these verses, but as we read the rest of the chapter and put all the pieces together, it becomes pretty clear that the leaders of the tribes made one pile of stones outside the river and Joshua himself made another in the middle of the river.

These two piles served two purposes. The first was a memorial. Much like the 9/11 memorial in New York City or the Vietnam memorial in Washington DC, these two piles of stones would ensure, "We will never forget. God cut off the river. God let us walk through. We are God's people!" It's difficult to convey the significance of a memorial just from a description. Just looking at a postcard of the Vietnam memorial might not stir up many emotions. But go to that memorial. Stand there with a veteran from the Vietnam war. Walk through the museum at ground zero, with someone who was late to work that day and was miraculously spared. Suddenly this isn't just a museum, this isn't just a stone wall, these aren't just twelve random stones in a pile. This is a memorial, so we never forget.

And this is a teaching tool so that our children and their children and their children and their children will never, ever, forget. We pray there will never be another 9/11. And the children of Israel never had another cutting off of the water of the Jordan river. God didn't promise to do this same miracle again. God didn't promise to ever do another miracle. He trusted his people to teach their children about this one. God anticipates that children will ask, "What do these stones mean?" And then grandma will remember that day when she walked by the ark and with that same tear in her eye, she will tell the true story of entering the promised land. And she will say, "We are still God's people!"

Do we remember? I recall studying for my confirmation exam and getting nervous hiccups several times. No other explanation than nerves. Never happened to me anytime before or since. Maybe I was worried that if I got one question wrong and or messed up one, "What does this mean?" I wouldn't get confirmed and couldn't take Jesus' body and blood. But five years later, a professor at the Seminary asked me, "What's the first article?" "I believe in God the Father almighty." "What does this mean?" he asked. I couldn't tell you. What I had promised to never forget, I had forgotten. What about you? When your child comes back from the first Catechism class and says, "We have to learn all the books of the Old Testament. In order." Could you model them? When there's a baptism in church and they ask, "What's that?" What do you say? When you invite a friend to church and they see communion and they ask, "Should I go up with you?" What will your answer be? Have you forgotten? Might make you wonder, "Am I still God's child?"

Then look back, literally, many of you will have to turn around. Look back at the baptismal font. There, right at that spot, God said, "You are my child! Your sins are forgiven!" God signed your forgiveness papers. God sealed them with his word. God delivered them with wonderful water. You are God's child. Your sins are forgiven. But what if I forget? Then get instructed if you have not yet been and get yourself to the Lord's Supper. God gets us. God knows that we forget. So God gave us this meal for the forgiveness of sins. All our forgetting is forgotten. All our failures are forgiven. This body was given for you! This blood was poured out for you! This is as close to Jesus as you are ever going to get here on earth. This supper is your day crossing the Jordan. This meal is you entering the promised land. This body and this blood, right here, at this place they are your rock solid assurance, "I am God's child. We are God's people." Amen.