

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI  
Pastor Mark Gartner  
Sermon for Celebration Sunday -- November 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012

### **Joshua 1:6-9**

**6 "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. 7 Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."**

In the name of our Savior, dear friends,

It has been said by more than one person, "Life is like a roller coaster." In many cases that statement is very true. Life is full of moments where we are at the peak of the "roller coaster" and everything is very good. But just like a roller coaster that peak of happiness and success can leave in an instant as you plummet into some horrible life crisis. Only to be followed up by some kind of uplifting moment which is then followed up by some earthly problem. I think that you get the point -- Life is full of ups and downs. The ups are very fun and the downs are very difficult.

Life in a congregation can mimic this same roller coaster ride. There are the peaks and the valleys of doing the Lord's work in a congregation. But I want us all to think about our lives and consider this question, "Does life really have to be like a roller coaster?" This morning through the life of Joshua we want to take a closer look at our individual lives and also our congregational life to see that maybe we don't have to live the "roller coaster" mentality. Through the words of encouragement and strength that God spoke to Joshua as he was about to lead the people of Israel across the Jordan River we can see very clearly on this Celebration Sunday that:

### **Theme: God Has Blessed Us!**

- 1. With the promise of his power**
- 2. With the promise of his presence**

What a hero of faith Joshua was! The first time we meet him in Scripture he's the general of Israel's army in a battle with the Amalekites. We remember that account better for the scene of Israel winning as long as Moses can keep his arms up in blessing and Aaron and Hur holding up Moses' arms when they grew tired. But down there in the thick of things was Joshua. Moses had ordered him to fight and fight he did, following the Lord's command faithfully and trusting in the Lord completely.

Another appearance of Joshua we probably know better occurred 40 years before our text. Israel, fresh from the Lord's great deliverance out of Egypt, had traveled within reach of the Promised Land. Before them lay Canaan flowing with milk and honey, promised to them by a Lord God who had shown himself faithful by his recent dealings with them. 12 spies went to check out the land. Included in that group were Joshua and Caleb. When the spies came back, 10 of them had their hearts in their throats, telling terrifying stories of walled cities and armed giants. When the Israelites heard their stories, they're stampeded by fear and spoke blasphemous words about wanting to go back to "good old Egypt". It was faithful Joshua, along with Caleb, who stood up against the majority and said: "Let's go! We can do it! The Lord is with us."

Here he is a graybeard in his eighties. 40 years later, Joshua is standing again at the edge of the Promised Land. Imagine what's going on in his mind when the Lord spoke to him. Moses, Israel's great spiritual leader had gone to heaven. Joshua had been chosen to fill his shoes. The children of Israel were not exactly the easiest people to lead. They whined, rebelled and continued to show a woeful lack of faith even in the midst of all those miracles the Lord performed for them. As a wise general, Joshua knew what

was waiting on the other side of that Jordan River. There was the dangerous crossing swollen by the spring floods. On the other side, the residents were not going to pack their bags and move out of the neighborhood just because Israel was coming! There would be one battle after another against mighty armies positioned inside of well-fortified cities. Yet when the Lord told Joshua to move out, he did. There were no questions about the risks. Just this command to Israel: **“Get your supplies ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan and take possession of the land the Lord God is giving you as your own.”** Joshua the man of faith trusts in a faithful Lord God who sent him across the Jordan with this promise: **“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged; for the Lord your God will go with you wherever you go.”**

Today we as a congregation are undertaking some big and wonderful things. We could look around and say that things are too tough and that we will never reach our goals. Or we can be encouraged by our Lord and Savior just like Joshua was to move forward with the Lord’s strength guiding us every step of the way. In a nation that’s wrong side up and right side down, living by principles totally opposed to Jesus’ teachings, we still need men, women, and children of faith like Joshua who trust a faithful Lord God and go out there on fire for Jesus, determined to live according to his Word no matter what happens to them. Maybe you haven’t thought about this. Is it getting easier or harder to be a Christian? Easier or harder to wear Christ’s uniform and fight his battles? Easier or harder to follow Jesus’ leading instead of going along with the crowd? Are there “Jordan rivers” we’ll have to cross as a congregation or that you’ll have to have to cross in your personal life? Will they be just little trickles we easily cross over or will they be raging floods that threaten to sweep us and our congregation away? Will you stand up for Jesus and live your life to his glory in whatever Canaan you will enter? We must ask the question: “Are we strong and courageous? Are we following God’s Word day and night? Do we truly trust that God has blessed us in the past and will continue to do so into the future?”

Yes, we do have people who have been led by God’s powerful Word and are ready to cross their “Jordan Rivers”! I’m looking at them in the faces of all those little boys and girls and teenagers among us, the young Christians who are the future of this congregation! But there are more! There are Grandmas and Grandpas, Moms and Dads, married couples and singles, widows, widowers and retirees – all the faithful members of a Christian congregation called St. Luke’s Evangelical Lutheran Church.

By God’s grace you and I also are people of faith with a Lord and Savior who has never been anything but faithful to us. If we wanted we could take any one of your lives and we could make a map of that life. For some that map would be quite extensive, covering 7, 8, or maybe even 9 decades. That map would see you going from being a tiny baby helpless in the arms of your mother to a child lining up to go to your first day of school to a young person dating and falling in love and marrying. That map would have hard times and sicknesses and discouragements on it. That map would have hospitals and funerals on it. But one thing on that map would always be the same, no matter who you are. This faithful Lord God has never stopped going with you wherever you went! And just as surely as he will present our congregation and you more “Jordan rivers” to cross and more battles to fight for him before our time on this earth is over, just as surely will these words spoken to Joshua always belong to this congregation and to you: **“Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged; for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”**

A faithful Lord God who will go with our congregation and you wherever we go! A faithful Lord God who will strengthen our congregation and you whenever we waver! A faithful Lord God who will answer St. Luke’s and you with blessings whenever we are frightened or discouraged! That’s why we can look around and see that we are blessed by our Lord and Savior!

## 2. With the promise of his presence

**“Moses, my servant is dead,”** These are the words that a faithful Lord God said to Joshua. But this Lord God’s promise was very much alive and about to be fulfilled. **“You will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them,”** The Jordan would be crossed, Jericho’s

walls would come tumbling down, the land would be given into their hands, not because Joshua was such a terrific leader and the Israelites were such great warriors, but because this faithful Lord God would make it happen just as he promised.

You see, behind that promise of the land is a far more glorious promise, the promise of a Savior. The land of Canaan would be only the construction site on which God would build our salvation. From the manger in Bethlehem's hillside to the cross on Calvary's knoll to the empty tomb in the Jerusalem garden, Canaan was the setting in which this faithful God would work out his wonderful plan of salvation, sending his Son, Jesus, to live and die in our place, to cover over our ugly sins with his precious blood shed for us on a cross and then to be the ultimate Joshua who leads forgiven sinners into the promised land of heaven. Meanwhile, the man the Lord picked to lead his people into the Promised Land was a frail, sinful human being.

How could Joshua do it? What if he messed up? What if he wasn't smart enough, strong enough, good enough? Look again at what the Lord told Joshua. He didn't point Joshua to Joshua – how good he was or what he had done or could do. No, the Lord pointed Joshua to his promise. **“Be strong!”** he commanded that man who must've felt very weak. **“Be courageous!”** he commanded that man who must've been overwhelmed by the daunting task assigned to him. 3 times the Lord repeated that **“strong and courageous”** advice. But then he told Joshua why he would be **“strong and courageous.”** Only because **“the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”**

Then this faithful Lord God pointed Joshua to the source of such power: **“Do not let this book of the law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night so that you may careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.”** “Stick to my Word,” he commanded Joshua. “Meditate on it day and night and then let it be your guide in whatever you do,” he encouraged Joshua. **“Then,”** the Lord God promised, **“you will be prosperous and successful.”** Joshua would know his Savior God's promises. Joshua would have the Spirit's power in his heart to believe those promises. Here is a faithful God who both keeps his promises and gives every Christian the power of his Word to live on those promises.

Do you think that those words apply to you and me? Do you think those words apply to the people of St. Luke's Lutheran Church? They most certainly do! We need to realize what is important as we do the Lord's work. We cannot measure things by purely human standards. We can only look to the Lord and trust that we will bless our faithful efforts. We need the faithful Lord God whose Word is filled with power. The devil will try with all his might in the days ahead to get us so full of ourselves, with our own plans and our ways of doing things so we feel less and less need for God's Word of power. Satan will try to downsize our God from a living, loving, leading Lord into some kind of “little league god” who doesn't always know what he's doing and can't help us even if he did. When such things happen, then hear with Joshua our Lord God say it again: **“I am with you wherever you go!”**

How are we going to handle the many sinful failures of life so they don't drive us to despair? How will we as a congregation ever be a force for good in this wicked world, pointing the ungodly outside our doors to the cross of Christ? How in the world are we going to carry out God's great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations? The answer to all those questions is here in the promises of the Bible. The same promises that he gave to Joshua and the same promises he gives to all of his children.

The Lord God promised Joshua, **“you will be prosperous and successful.”** Our Jesus promises us the same thing when he says: **“Blessed are those who hear the Word and obey it!”** So let's go to God's Book every day. Let's draw power for our congregational life from its unbreakable promises. Then we can cross our Jordans and fight our battles. Then trust that God will bless us and our congregation as we faithfully trust in God's promises. Best of all, then we can be strong and courageous for Jesus until our dying day. Yes, with a faithful Savior beside us and his powerful Word to guide us, we will continue to be blessed every day until he calls us home to heaven. Amen