

SERMON FOLLOWED BY SERVICE - October 25, 2025 Joshua 4:1-9

They were on the edge of town. Up that way was downtown. Down that way was a gravel road heading out into the countryside. They dug a hole, laid a foundation, and started stacking stones, walls of stone. Why stone? I wish I knew. Their old church was white wood siding. Many of the other churches in town were brick. But they stacked stone. On the edge of town it stood out then; we still stand out today. A church of stone. Why stone? Or as our lesson puts it: “What do these stones mean?”

What do these stones mean? They’re solid, aren’t they? Strong. Like our God - solid, strong. Like his church - solid, strong, safe, and secure. These stones stand out to get our attention; they stand out to tell us about our God and the church he has for us - solid, strong, safe and secure.

In our lesson we have another set of stones, 12 stones, one for each tribe of Israel. It’s about forty years, almost forty years to the day since God delivered his people out of Egypt. Now God is ready to deliver his people into the promised land. Just as the Red Sea stood in the way of Israel forty years earlier, now the Jordan River flowed in the way flooding at flood stage. But just as God delivered his people through the Red Sea, today God delivers his people through the Jordan River. Except for a little difference. At the Red Sea, God told Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea; a wind blew and the waters parted for Israel to walk on dry ground. At the Jordan River, we have this difference. Instead of Joshua raising his hand over the water, God gave these instructions - the ark of the covenant of the LORD, carried by the Levite priests, would lead the way.

We don’t talk much about the ark of the covenant. After God delivered his people out of Egypt, he gathered them at Mt. Sinai. At Mt. Sinai God made a special covenant, a special contract, with Israel - “If you obey me, if you follow me, out of all the people of the world, I will make you to be my people, my kingdom and priests.” As part of that covenant, on Mt. Sinai God gave Moses and his people the Ten Commandments carved into two tablets of stone. As part of that covenant, on that mountain God gave his people special instructions for the building of a tabernacle, a portable temple. In that tabernacle, in a special room called the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place, God had his ark of the covenant, a wooden chest almost four feet long, just over two feet wide and two feet high. That chest was covered inside and out with gold. It had a cover made of solid gold. Built into and on top of the cover were two cherubim, two angels with their wings spread out. That ark of the covenant was where God met his people, the symbol of God’s presence with his people. So when the ark led the way, who was leading the way? Not just Joshua; not just the Levite priests; it was God leading his people into the Promised Land.

And what happened? When the priests carrying the ark stepped into the flood waters of the Jordan, miles upstream, the river stopped flowing, the waters piled up. And Israel crossed over on dry ground. I won't say it's as exciting and awesome as splitting the Red Sea, but you try it. Step into the Des Plaines or the Fox or even Bull Creek and see if the water stops running. It won't happen. But when God took his people to the Jordan, he did the impossible and stopped the river. He did what his people thought impossible and opened the way to the Promised Land. He did the impossible and kept his impossible promises!

Good things to remember, isn't it? God thought so. So he planned a memorial, a monument. Nothing as tall as the Washington Monument, nothing as impressive as the Lincoln Memorial or Mt. Rushmore. Just 12 stones. Twelve stones from the river bottom of the Jordan. God had Joshua pick twelve men, one from each of the tribes. When the river was stopped up, held back, each picked a rock from the river bottom and piled them where the priests stood with the ark of the covenant. As the river was stopped up, held back, each picked a rock from the river bottom and carried them on their shoulders to their new camp on the west side of the river. Both piles were set as monuments, markers to raise the question: "What do these stones mean?" Markers to start the conversation: "Look what our God can do!"

What if, out of all his people, God chose you to pick a stone to memorialize the greatness of God? What kind of stone would you pick? The first one you found? The easiest to pick? The lightest to carry? I don't think so. We might look for the prettiest, the biggest, the most colorful - we'd want to pick a stone, to give a stone that showed the greatness of God, that showed what we think of God, right?

We don't always do that, do we? Sometimes what we do for God, what we give for God, doesn't show God off in a very good way. Sometimes what we do for God, what we give for God, shows God off as the God of our leftovers, a God content with slop, the God of a people who don't think all that much of him. Sometimes what we do for God, what we give for God, instead of starting the conversation: "Look what our God can do," sometimes we have people wondering: "Their God doesn't seem to mean much to them, does he?"

And yet, what does our God do? Instead of hiding from us, he reaches out to us. Instead of keeping us out, he brings us in. Instead of throwing us downstream, instead of letting us drown in our sin and be damned with the world, he washes us in the water of baptism and puts his name on us - "You are my son, my daughter, whom I love, with you I am well-pleased!" Instead of crossing us off, he crosses us with Christ. He crosses off our sin and guilt; he covers us with Christ and shows us off as his! Instead of treating us like good-for-nothings, he picks us. He still picks us to pick rocks for him. In other words, he still picks us to show him off.

How will we do that? How will we show that our God isn't just a god of left-overs and slop, content with left-overs and slop? How will we show that our God isn't just a part-timer, a semi-retired, distracted, inattentive god content with a part-time, distracted, inattentive church? How will we show that our God isn't just a hood ornament or a bumper sticker - a nice look, a nice thought, a god soon forgotten and ignored?

How will we show that our God is the God who saves? How will we show that our God is the God who keeps impossible promises? How will we show that our God is golden, that he is the brightest and the best, that he deserves the brightest and the best, and that we are determined to give him our brightest and our best? How will we show that our God is worth believing and not just believing in our heads, but that our God is worth following in every part of our lives? How will we show God off?

Today we are celebrating anniversaries, thanking God for Jesus and his saving truth, thanking God for his Spirit gathering his church together and to himself for generations before us. Today we are celebrating anniversaries, thanking God that he has given us his saving truth, thanking God that he has gathered us together and to himself. Today we are celebrating anniversaries, thanking God for the way he has blessed his church for centuries and generations before us. Today we are celebrating anniversaries, thanking God for the way he has blessed us with his church. How will we show that today, tomorrow, for the generations to come? How will we show that in our lives, in our families, here in our church, around the world in our WELS? How will we show God off? Amen.

THE LEGACY OF LUTHER SINGS ON!

October 26, 2025

PRAYER BEFORE WORSHIP

I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger. Keep me this day from all sin and every form of evil, that all my doings and life may please you. Into your hands I commend my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen. - Dr. Martin Luther

Deutsche Messe

Luther's first effort at liturgical reform in Wittenberg (December 1523) was to remove from the historic service various forms that had accentuated the sacrifice of the mass and other false teachings of the medieval church. The service remained in Latin, however, and included only a German sermon and several German hymns. He hesitated to prepare a German order of service because he feared some would try to impose his work on the entire German church and because he sensed a German service needed original music. After repeated requests, he produced the *German Mass and Order of Service* which was used in Wittenberg for the first time on October 29, 1525.

It is impossible and impractical to reproduce exactly the service Luther created. The following service enables us to gain a sense of our liturgical heritage, however, and to experience an order that established the framework for Lutheran worship to our day. Italicized worship notes are from *Luther's Works*, Volume 53, pages 61ff. This service is adapted from the 2012 Reformation Service at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

ODDS-N-ENDS

As in the medieval Latin mass, Luther began his service with an Entrance Psalm. This was a psalm that was chanted as the clergy entered. Luther opened up the mass greatly to congregational participation by providing hymns based on the psalms, replacing the one chanted only by the choir. "A Mighty Fortress," a metrical version of Psalm 46, is the most beloved of these metrical psalms.

Lutherans today will immediately notice the absence of the Confession of Sins at the start of the service. The early Lutheran Church continued to use private confession and absolution – not the Roman sacrament of Penance ("going to Confession"). The addition of confession and absolution for all at the beginning of worship became part of the Lutheran liturgy in America with the introduction of the "Common Service" of 1888.

PRELUDE

Piano Selections by Valerie Floeter

"A Mighty Fortress" by Cor Kee
"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" by Otto Schgenk
"A Mighty Fortress" by Charles Callahan

*In the true mass of real Christians, the altar should not remain where it is, and the priest should always face the people as Christ doubtlessly did in the Last Supper.
To begin the service we sing a hymn or a German psalm...*

HYMN

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

CW 863

Luther's rendition on Psalm 46

A mighty fortress is our God, a trusty shield and weapon;
he helps us free from ev'ry need that has us now o'ertaken.
The old evil foe now means deadly woe;
deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight;
on earth is not his equal.

With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected;
but for us fights the valiant one whom God himself elected.
You ask, "Who is this?" Jesus Christ it is,
the almighty Lord, and there's no other God;
he holds the field forever.

Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,
we tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpow'r us.
This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will,
he can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done;
one little word can fell him.

The Word they still shall let remain nor any thanks have for it;
he's by our side upon the plain with his good gifts and Spirit.
And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife,
though all may be gone, our victory is won;
the kingdom's ours forever!

PLEASE STAND FOR VERSE 4

Then follows the Kyrie eleison... (Kyrie eleison is Greek for "Lord, have mercy.")

KYRIE, GOD FATHER IN HEAVEN ABOVE

CW 934 (adapted)

Latin Trope, 9th century; German version, Wittenberg, 1541

M: Kyrie, God Father in heav'n above,
You abound in gracious love,

Of all things the maker and preserver.

C: Lord, have mercy.

M: Kyrie, O Christ our King,
Salvation for all you came to bring.
O Lord Jesus, God's own Son,
Our Mediator at the heav'nly throne,
Hear our cry and grant our supplication.

C: Lord, have mercy.

M: Kyrie, O God the Holy Ghost,
Guard our faith, the gift we need the most,
And bless our life's last hour
That we leave this sinful world with gladness.

C: Lord, have mercy.

Thereupon the minister reads a collect...

M: Almighty God, through the preaching of your servants, the blessed Reformers, you caused the light of the gospel to shine forth. Grant that we may faithfully defend it against all enemies and joyfully proclaim it to the salvation of people everywhere to the glory of your holy name; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: Amen.

BE SEATED

OLD TESTAMENT

Joshua 4:1-9

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, "Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, and tell them to take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, from right where the priests are standing, and carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight."

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."

So the Israelites did as Joshua commanded them. They took twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the LORD had told Joshua; and they carried them over with them to their camp, where they put them down. Joshua set up the twelve stones that had been in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Thereafter the Epistle on the eighth tone...

EPISTLE

Revelation 3:7–13

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

After the Epistle, a German hymn, either “We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost” or any other is sung...

HYMN

“To God the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray”

CW 596

To God the Holy Spirit let us pray for the true faith needed on our way
that when life is ending he may defend us,
on our homeward journey attend us.
Lord, have mercy!

O sweetest Love, your grace on us bestow;
set our hearts with sacred fire aglow
that with hearts united we love each other,
ev’ry stranger, sister, and brother.
Lord, have mercy!

Transcendent Comfort in our ev’ry need,
help us neither scorn nor death to heed
that we may not falter nor courage fail us
when the foe shall taunt and assail us.
Lord, have mercy!

Shine in our hearts, O Spirit, precious light;
teach us Jesus Christ to know aright
that we may abide in the Lord who bought us,

until home at last he has brought us.
Lord, have mercy!

Then he reads the Gospel on the fifth tone...

GOSPEL

John 8:31–36

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise be to you, O Christ!

After the Gospel, the whole congregation sings the Creed...

WE ALL BELIEVE IN ONE TRUE GOD

CW(93) 271

(a similar translation is CW 941)

Credo

Words by Martin Luther based on a 14th century Latin credo

- M: We all believe in one true God,
C: **Who created earth and heaven,**
M: The Father, who to us in love
C: **Has the right of children given.**
M: He in soul and body feeds us;
C: **All we need his hand provides us.**
M: He through snares and perils leads us,
C: **Watching that no harm betides us.**
M: He cares for us by day and night;
C: **All things are governed by his might.**
- M: We all believe in Jesus Christ,
His own Son, our Lord, possessing
C: **An equal Godhead, throne, and might,**
Source of ev'ry grace and blessing,
M: Born of Mary, virgin mother,
By the power of the Spirit,
C: **Made true man, our elder brother,**
That the lost might life inherit,
M: Was crucified by sinful men
C: **And raised by God to life again.**
- M: We all confess the Holy Ghost,
C: **Who, sweet hope and comfort giving,**
M: Now with the Father and the Son

C: In eternal light is living,
M: Who the Church, his own creation,
C: Keeps in unity of spirit;
M: Here forgiveness and salvation
C: Daily come through Jesus' merit.
M: All flesh shall rise, and we shall be
C: In bliss with God eternally.

BONUS HYMN

"Not unto Us"

CW 582

Not unto us, not unto us be glory, Lord;
not unto us but to your name be praise;
not unto us but to your name all honor be giv'n
for matchless mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

Amazing grace—that chose us ere the worlds were made;
amazing grace—that sent your Son to save;
amazing grace—that robed us in your righteousness
and taught our lips to sing glory and praise.

O faithful love—that shepherded through faithless years;
forgiving love—that led us to your truth;
unyielding love—that would not let us turn from you
but sent us forth to speak pardon and peace.

Not unto us but to your name be glory, Lord,
for grace so rich, so wide, so high, so free.
Abide with us till trav'ling days are over and done,
and pilgrim feet lead us home, Lord, to you.

Then follows the sermon...

SERMON

HYMN

"Father, God of Grace, You Knew Us"

CW 566 vs. 1-3

Father, God of grace, you knew us, chose us, named us as your own,
through eternal ages planning
to redeem us in your Son.
Praise the Father, God who loved us
ere creation was begun!

We, your creatures, sinned against you,
and our guilt was crimson red.
Son of God, you came incarnate,
crushed the crafty serpent's head,

died our death, now live triumphant:
praise the firstborn from the dead!

Counselor, you bring as promised
from the Father and the Son
righteousness fulfilled, accomplished,
free forgiveness, heaven won.
Praise the Spirit! He assures us
our salvation's work is done!

OFFERING

Having heard the Word of God, it is appropriate for his people to offer themselves and their possessions to him, and to pray that his Word would bring more souls throughout the world into his kingdom as an offering to him. In Luther's day, the offerings weren't part of the service proper. Instead, an offering for the poor would have been gathered at the door following the service.

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After the sermon shall follow a public paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer.

- M: I invite you to lift up your hearts to God and pray with me the Lord's Prayer as Christ our Lord taught us.
We pray that God, our Father in heaven, would look with mercy on us, his needy children on earth. We pray that God would grant us grace so that his holy name be hallowed by us and all the world through the pure and true teaching of his Word and the fervent love of our lives, and that he would graciously turn us from all false doctrine and evil living by which his precious name is being blasphemed and profaned.
- C: **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.**
- M: We pray that his kingdom may come to us and expand, that all transgressors and all who are blinded and bound by the devil's kingdom may be brought to know Jesus Christ his Son by faith, and that the number of Christians may be increased.
- C: **Your kingdom come.**
- M: We pray that we may be strengthened by his Spirit to do and to accept his will, both in life and in death, in good and in evil things, and always to break, slay, and sacrifice our own wills.
- C: **Your will be done on earth as in heaven.**

M: We pray that our Father would also give us our daily bread, preserve us from greed and selfish cares, and help us to trust that he will provide for all our needs.

C: Give us today our daily bread.

M: We ask that God would forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us so that our hearts may rest and rejoice in a good conscience before him, and that no sin may ever frighten or alarm us.

C: Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.

M: We pray that God would not lead us into temptation but help us by his Spirit to subdue the flesh, to despise the [sinful] world and its ways, and to overcome the devil with all his wiles.

C: Lead us not into temptation.

M: And finally we pray that God would deliver us from all evil, both of body and soul, now and forever.

C: But deliver us from evil.

M: All those who sincerely desire these things will say from their very hearts: "Amen," trusting without doubt that their prayers are answered in heaven as Christ has promised: "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and you will."

C: For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

M: May this be a time, O Lord, for confession and repentance. Forgive us for the apathy that harms our faith and hinders our works. Forgive us for boasting of our past achievements and for blaming others for our present problems. Rid us of indifference to public worship and Bible study. Destroy the distrust that plagues us, and shatter every thought and word that harms the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace.

C: Create in us pure hearts, O God, and renew steadfast spirits within us.

M: Let this be a time, O Lord, when you renew us again by Word and sacrament, when you reform our hearts and minds, and when you restore to us the joy of fellowship and service. Grant to us in this age and in this place the courage of the apostles, the steadfastness of the reformers, and the dedication of those who have gone before us.

C: Create in us pure hearts, O God, and renew steadfast spirits within us.

M: Let this be a time, O Lord, when we recommit and reconsecrate ourselves to the ministry of the gospel. Let us find joy in our unity, zeal for our work, and success in our labor.

C: Create in us pure hearts, O God, and renew steadfast spirits within us.

PLEASE STAND

HYMN

"Father, God of Grace, You Knew Us"

CW 566 vs. 4-5

Lord, your changeless Word has fed us,
spanning time, transcending space.

Water, bread, and wine sustained us
when the darkness hid your face.
Keep us with you, faithful Shepherd,
by your saving means of grace!

Forward lead us; Christ, we follow,
drawn by Word and promise true:
"To all nations preach the gospel;
I am evermore with you."
Keep us faithful! Then, Lord Jesus,
quickly come; make all things new!

M: The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.
The Lord look on you with favor and ✠ give you peace.

C: **Amen.**

POSTLUDE

"A Mighty Fortress" by Charles Callahan
"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" by Kevin Hildebrand

SPECIAL THANKS

We thank Eli Haak for pre-service music on the organ, and Louis Luedtke for blessing our Sunday worship with trumpet.

An order is an external thing. No matter how good it is, it can be abused. Then it is no longer an order, but a disorder. No order is, therefore, valid in itself—as the popish orders were held to be until now. But the validity, value, power, and virtue of any order is in its proper use. Otherwise, it is utterly worthless and good for nothing. God's Spirit and grace be with us all. Amen. -Martin Luther

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A Synod is Born

On December 8, 1849, three Lutheran pastors, led by Johannes Muehlhaeuser, met at Grace Downtown in Milwaukee, WI, and “recognized the need of a joint effort to spread the kingdom of God for the Lutheran Church in Wisconsin.” Muehlhaeuser recalled, “Just as the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, so also was the very small beginning of our synod.” The synod adopted its constitution at its first official meeting on May 26, 1850, in Granville, Wisconsin.

The very first resolution in the synod’s history, made at the December 8, 1849, meeting, stated: “That the synod which is to be founded bear the name ‘The First German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin’ and that this specific name and title remain with it forever.” There’s a story in the details:

- The synod was technically not “The First” since two other German Lutheran synods were already present in Wisconsin.
- The synod was “German” because its ministers came from Germany, spoke German, and sought to serve the large population of German immigrants who had no spiritual shepherds.
- The synod was “Evangelical” since it sought to make the proclamation of the gospel its chief endeavor.
- The synod was “Lutheran” because it sought primarily to serve churchless Lutherans and it followed the teachings of the Reformer Martin Luther.
- The synod was a “synod” (a Greek word that literally means “coming together”) because the pastors wanted to work together to accomplish more gospel ministry.
- The synod was “of Wisconsin” because all its leaders served people in Wisconsin. At that time, most states had Lutheran synods of their own, so the first generation primarily focused on one region within their means.

Much has changed since the synod’s mustard seed-like beginnings 175 years ago – including its name. Yet one thing remains clear: The Word of the Lord endures forever.

An anniversary prayer

God of Mercy, God of truth, we praise you because you have given your grace in Christ to us. We humbly honor you for placing your gift of Christ in us, and we boldly pray that you keep us faithful to your truth and bless your message of Christ through us. In his gracious name. Amen.