

When the whole nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, ²“Choose twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, ³and 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.” ⁴So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, ⁵and 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, ⁶to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ⁷tell 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.” ⁸So 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. ⁹Joshua 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.

WHAT DOES THIS 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF WELS MEAN?

We are living in the prime time of Reformation anniversaries. From 2017, the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s posting his 95 theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg to 2046, the 500th anniversary of Martin’s Luther’s death, we have a wide variety of Reformation anniversaries. We’ve already had the 500th anniversary of the Diet of Worms in 2021 when Luther famously said, “...I cannot and will not recant...” Many regard the writing of the Augsburg Confession in 1530 as the true birthday of the Lutheran Church and that 500th anniversary is only 5 years away. But the many contributions of the early 1500s are not the only significant anniversaries of our church. Here at Grace our centennial is only 2 years away in 2027. And our church body, the Wisconsin Lutheran Evangelical Synod did us a huge favor when they signed their constitution in 1850. The signers had met in 1849, but 1850 is such a better number for us remembering this synod anniversary.

As we transition to our Joshua text I couldn’t help but think of our Lutheran catechism. That catechism anniversary, by the way, will be celebrated in 2029. Christians of different denominations find value in the initials of WWJD, but we in the Lutheran church find greater value in the initials of WDTM. Those letters might not roll off the tongue, but when our catechism students write out their memory work of the Ten Commandments or the three articles of the Apostles’ Creed they often write the initials WDTM as shorthand for ... “What does this mean?”

And that is the question our text asks of the twelve stones that were taken out of the middle of the Jordan River and used as a memorial for future generations. And what the stones mean is this: Christ with us! For the veteran Israelites this crossing of the Jordan River would trigger a forty-year-old memory. Forty years ago, when Moses was in his first-year of leading the Israelites, the Lord brought them to the shores of the Red Sea. And when Pharaoh had changed his mind about letting the Israelites go, it looked like the Israelites were doomed. There was panic and worry, fear and fretting that all the Israelites were all going to die and that they would have been better off as slaves in Egypt. And yet with the parting of the Red Sea, the Lord through the leadership of Moses, delivered this nation safely to the other side. The Israelites didn’t make a memorial of this event and why would they? They weren’t staying in this land and with all that God had done: the ten plagues, the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea there shouldn’t have ever been another need to panic and worry or to fear and to fret, but that’s exactly what these Israelites did during those forty years. Their faith in the Lord and his lead often gave way to fear and their obedience gave way to rebellion. And if the sad events of idolatry at Mount Sinai and unbelief among the twelve spies and ingratitude that brought venomous snakebites happened with Moses, what was going to happen with Joshua?

The answer the memorial stones gave these Israelites is: Christ with us! That is what those stones meant! It wouldn’t always be easy in the Promised Land. There were other nations in the cities of Jericho and Jerusalem. This next generation of Israelites would still have battles they needed to fight and they would still have temptations their Achan hearts would have a hard time overcoming. And yet there was no reason

to panic and worry or to fear and to fret because the Lord who had been with the Israelites in the past with Moses would be the same Lord who would be with them in the future with Joshua and the leaders after him.

What does this 175th Anniversary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod mean? Ultimately, this anniversary means: Christ with us. Obviously, the Lord does not need the Wisconsin Synod to be with his people any more than he needed Abraham, Issac and Jacob, but the Wisconsin Synod is a vehicle of leadership that God has used to safely deliver dear souls from unbelief to faith, from spiritual immaturity to Christian maturity, and from earth to heaven. Over the past 175 years our synod has experienced world wars and the civil war, financial troubles and other hardships that led many synod members to panic and worry, to fear and to fret. Even more troubling, our synod has faced threats to its doctrinal integrity to the teaching of Scripture and to its loving practice of seeking the lost and serving the found, but Christ has been with the Wisconsin Synod for 175 years even with all these challenges and that is what we are celebrating today. This is what the 175th anniversary of WELS means!

The emphasis is on Christ, but let's talk about the "us" in "Christ with us." I was reading this text to one of our homebound members a couple of weeks ago, and after I was done talking about the text the daughter of this homebound member asked, "What about the 12 tribes?" And so I talked about Asher and Naphtali and Zebulun and Judah and the other tribes and I talked about how before there were 12 tribes, there were 12 brothers. Twelve brothers from the same father and four different mothers. And how the father had his favorite son like the father before him. And I talked about how the brothers and the tribes were united, but there unity was kind of like the unity of our United States. In the best of times these brothers and tribes loved each other and fought for each other. In the worst of times these brothers and tribes were rivals and fought against each other. So, kind of like a church family and kind of like a church body.

It was an act of God that this family and this nation were held together long enough for the Savior to be born from it. This Savior was not ashamed to be their brother. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary the Savior lived under the law of God in their place and died as the atoning sacrifice for their sins. In the same way, it's an act of God that there will always be a faithful church on this earth and that the gates of hell will not overcome it. This promise is for us and for all who live in the end times. There will also be a faithful church in this world that holds to the teaching of the Bible and practices those teachings in the life of the church.

This promise has been made to believers, but not specifically to Grace Lutheran Church or the churches that make up the Wisconsin Synod, but don't panic and worry. Don't fear and fret but DO seek the Lord in prayer. Pray for yourselves and for your families. Pray for your congregation and its pastors. Pray for the local and global mission of the church. Seek the Lord in prayer but remember it's the Lord who finds you as you search the Scriptures and receive the sacraments. If Christ has clothed himself to each of us in our baptisms, we can be brotherly and sisterly to one another in our congregation. And if Christ has made himself one with us in the sacrament of Holy Communion, we can have unity and not rivalry with the other congregations in our Wisconsin Synod.

There is no pile of rocks to commemorate this 175th anniversary of WELS, but I'd encourage you to take a field trip out the doors of our narthex and to reflect on the stone the year 2005 engraved in it. And if you have the time and energy, walk along Palmyra Avenue and look for the stone with the year 1952 on it. I couldn't find the stone with a date on it with our first church, but if you can get inside our gates and walk around this first church building you can contemplate the founding members of Grace. Christ has been with us in the past and in Word and sacraments Christ will be with us in the future and so have conviction and confidence in our faith as well as boldness and determination in work. Christ is with us. Amen.