A close up of a logo

Description automatically generated

Joshua 4:18-24

MLC ECW Sunday

*(Sentences in parentheses: Some ask you to add information specific to your context, and some pertain only to congregations that have an LES.)*

Dear people of God, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb,

If the walls and halls could talk at this place, what stories would they tell? Perhaps some family stories of a great-grandmother at the baptism of a great-grandchild. Maybe stories of a little child’s singing her heart out during a Christmas Eve service. Perhaps the story of a victory service where family gathers to sing the triumph in Jesus even through tears of grief. (Perhaps those hallways of our Lutheran school would tell the stories of Bible verses recited or the echoes of hymns sung during afternoon devotion.) In all these stories, the common denominator is the truth that these are stories of the Spirit, stories of his gracious omnipotence unleased in places where the Word of Life brings rescue and hope, joy and peace, confidence and comfort. Stories that go back XXX years.

No church or school was ever erected to house our Lord God. Scripture declares and you believe that **the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.** Yet this building of stone and concrete is much like a pile of stones erected on a riverbank so far away and so long ago. It is a living testimony to the power and grace of a living God. But it remains a testimony only when there is a message connected with the memorial. WHO WILL TELL WHAT THESE STONES MEAN? It is imperative for God’s people to step forward and . . .

1. Explain a marvelous past.
2. Exclaim a confident future.

I. Explain a marvelous past.

A picture containing screenshot

Description automatically generatedEver wonder how those Israelites felt as they stood at the edge of the Jordan during flood stage? Talk about terrified. Remember, this is the generation that grew up wandering in a wilderness. Living in the desert does not afford much chance for swimming lessons. Here stands the nation waiting to cross over into the land they had heard so much about. A land Jacob demanded to be buried in. A land to which Joseph pledged his people to carry his bones when they finally went back. Now it is four centuries later. A new generation stands at the bank, most of whom did not know slavery, did not experience the plagues, did not walk through the Red Sea. All they knew was what Mom and Dad had told them. Their entire experience was limited to the Sinai, and 40 years made possible by manna and quail and water. Cross that river? How? Swimming was impossible. No jet skis tied to an acacia tree. What now?

Later today read through Joshua 3 & 4. See how God intervenes for his people. We read **the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam. The priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground.** On dry ground! Not muddy, murky river bottom. Solid footing. I imagine that some of those Israelites walking over the river bottom could not help but think of the stories Mom and Dad told around the desert campfires. The Red Sea crossing. It must have happened. We’re doing it too. They might never forget it, but others might. Would anybody remember in 50 years? Joshua, at God’s command, had a tribal representative from each tribe go into the riverbed and take a large stone. This pile of 12 stones would be a lasting teaching tool at Gilgal National Park. What do these stones mean? They mean a powerful God. He’s on our side. He opened the river so we could cross. God does the impossible. The Red Sea, the Jordan at flood stage—no matter. **He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God.** What do these stones mean? Future moms and dads were to teach the meaning behind the stones. What a Savior we have!

Have we forgotten our marvelous past? It is not so marvelous when we look at how we’ve acted or spoken. Who among us doesn’t wince when videotape of our memories flashes by? Sins of greed or anger, the times sins boiled over and we lashed out at our spouse or ridiculed a child or insulted a friend. Marvelous past? With downcast eyes we nod in agreement at Scripture’s assessment: **There is no one who does what is right, not even one.** Yet it is a marvelous past when we consider the Lord’s intervention in this place. What do these stones mean? God has been active here. Through faithful preaching and teaching (in pulpit and classroom), generations have been taught to look past self and focus on the Savior. This family of faith has been able to watch God work through the means of grace. New babies are brought forward to the Spirit’s font of life. This family watches children nurtured in the Spirit’s factory called a Lutheran Sunday School (and Lutheran grade school) and leave that school standing before the altar and confessing Jesus as Lord. This family watches couples shout to the world that true love flows from the cross, not from the heart, as they begin a lifelong journey together with Jesus. This family gathers to celebrate victory after victory when Jesus calls our brothers and sisters in the faith home to eternal glory. Look at the pile of stones called your church. It is a testimony pile. God is at work here for the last XXX years. Through the gospel God has rescued you, snatched you from being dragged down by Satan and his hordes. God opened up firm and solid ground by pouring Jesus into your heart, for he is the Way, the Truth, the Life. Who will teach what these stones mean? Who will teach the generations to come of God’s amazing activity, not only at the Jordan River but even here (close to the XXX River or XXX lake)? Look what God has done!

Unfortunately, history is not everyone’s favorite subject. But the future means change, so fast that one futurist now claims that in this Information Age, knowledge doubles every 18 months. Whether this statistic is right or wrong, most of us will still nod our heads and wonder who can keep up. Look at the stones and rejoice. The same Lord God active in the past has promised to be active in your future. Who will tell what these stones mean and then exclaim a confident future?

II. Exclaim a confident future

The Israelites probably had some doubts about moving on. After all, their parents balked when the spies reported a generation back. Only Joshua and Caleb believed that God could do the impossible. Human nature looks at massive walls, chariots and armies, swords and spears, and wonders, “Can I do it?” Jericho was before the nation. Jericho, one of the oldest inhabited cities on earth—strong walls and famed army. Yet look to the Lord. If he can plug up a river, can he throw down some stones? The stones on the bank pointed to God’s power, not man’s. And the powerful Lord was gaining a reputation in the land. **Now when all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the seacoast heard how the Lord had dried up the Jordan before the Israelites until we had crossed over, their hearts sank and they no longer had the courage to face the Israelites.** God is at work for his people. The future with the Lord is nothing short of miraculous. Walls would fall. The sun would stand still. Hailstones would cut down an enemy army. Those stones on the riverbank were not only a reminder, but also a portent of things to come. **If God is for us, who can be against us?**

What is our future? Satan would have us think that the best is in the past. Never. The best is always to come. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, we walk with Jesus, the Captain of Salvation, just as surely as Joshua did. We walk with the One who crushed the serpent’s head for all time. We walk with the One who came to wash our sins from God’s memory. He says, **You are forgiven. I will remember your sins no more.** Imagine! The One who is omniscient promises to forget. So we walk with the One who takes us to the place he has prepared. We walk with the One who speaks always in love. Our sins forgotten means there is never an awkward conversation. We walk with the One who already walked through the valley of the shadow of death. We walk with the One who comes again to take us home. What do these stones mean? This church (and school building) is an eloquent testimony that we wait for Jesus to return. God continues to reveal his power and his salvation through the Word taught and the sacraments received. And amazingly, he does so through weak vessels, clay pots. Your called workers are here to work with parents and bring alive the stones, the stones on the River Jordan, and the stones of this church. But where do these called workers come from?

Who will tell the next generation here and in 1,235 other congregations throughout North America? Who will tell the children the saving name of Jesus in the 54 countries we are trying to serve? Martin Luther College is your College of Ministry, training pastors and teachers and staff ministers. No doubt, you know the urgent need for workers. Almost 110 pulpits are vacant, with some congregations calling for a year or even two before receiving a pastor. Teacher shortages in some areas now hamper our ministry and limit our expansion. Our synod has even had a request to start a high school in a foreign country, teaching our own curriculum—no strings attached. But we don’t have the teachers. We have received requests from almost 3000 men from around the world who want to be trained for ministry. That’s 30 times the size of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Opportunities abound. Vacancies about. And the time is now.

Martin Luther College has begun a two-year campaign entitled “Equipping Christian Witnesses.” The first pillar of this campaign is recruitment. Fifteen years ago we had almost 1100 students on our campus in New Ulm, Minnesota. Under God and by the Spirit’s power, can we increase enrollment by 35% in the next four to five years to reach nearly that same number? And if we recruit students, can we retain them with increased financial aid and enhanced facilities? I ask you to carefully read our campaign materials and then to pray boldly. I ask you to lovingly encourage a daughter or son of your congregation to consider ministry. What a privilege of grace to be called as an instrument of the Spirit to bring the Word of Life and to impact a heart for all eternity. Come on, children of God, we follow the Miracle Worker. God has given us everything we need to carry his gospel forward. We have the Word. Let’s stand at the stones and confess our sins of selfishness and doubt, of fear and worry. Let’s stand at the stones and rejoice in God’s power to save. Let’s stand at the stones and dedicate ourselves anew. And when your children and grandchildren ask, “What do these stones mean?” Tell them. Tell them about the saving activity of the Lord Jesus Christ in our midst. Tell them that they, too, can be messengers of the victory only Jesus brings. Amen.