

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Joshua 24:11-2a, 14-18 Ephesians 6:10-20 John 6:56-69
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
August 22, 2021 [Traditional]

You may have noticed the message on the Purple Door Church marquee lately. It says, "Hold on. God knows what he's doing." Of course that speaks to the confusion, anger and fear that a lot of people are feeling today, with the way the world seems like it's going. We know that God knows what he's doing, but right now it's just really hard for us to see it. You see real damage being done in the nation. Foundational damage. So much division and hatred. We see disturbing signs in the churches, too. For a decade before Covid, church attendance and church membership had been falling across the nation; some surveys put it as high as 35 percent loss since 2000. 35%. Something's going on. A massive change in a nation's spiritual life. We know that God is at the center of everything, but when people don't publicly acknowledge God, when they aren't hearing his reforming and transforming word of power and forgiveness and grace, then something else is always going to come in and fill that power void in people's lives. It's not like you push God out, and the house is now empty. Something else is always going to come in, and become that authoritative voice for people. A lot of people are saying we have become ancient Rome, where people worshiped thousands of different gods and feared only the emperor.

So it's easy for us, when we look at the world through the Word of God, through the love and mercy of Jesus, to get discouraged right now. I've been reading the psalms a lot lately, and I notice, I really key in on those passages where the psalmist feels abandoned: like, "Where are you, God?" What could God possibly be up to in all this? What will he bring out of all this fear and conflict?

Our lessons today speak right to it. In the first reading, we're witnessing a renewal of the covenant between God and the people of Israel at Schechem. Joshua was Israel's leader at that time, and he's speaking for God in this passage. Remember the context: after 40 years in the harsh wilderness, they had finally crossed the Jordan River and entered the promised land. And after fighting many hard battles with the Canaanites, the way is now pretty much clear, finally, for them to make their homes there. So it's a big transition for Israel, from being on the road and fighting all the time, to settling down in the land. And God, through Joshua, puts this challenge to them: "Now choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household," Joshua says, "we will serve the Lord." And the people respond basically, it'd be unthinkable for us not to serve the Lord who has saved us from slavery in Egypt and who has carried us all this way to victory. It's by his grace and by his saving power alone that we stand here." This, I think, helps us reframe the picture, when we ask, "what is God up to in our world today?" He's telling his people, the Church, each one of us in this room: this is renewal time. This is recommitment time. In the middle of this stormy weather—this is when you are being challenged—even forced—to Choose whom you will serve...the gods of the culture around you, or the God of Israel. So this is not just a time of

convulsions and confusion and struggle and 35% losses, this is not a time to be grumpy and defensive. God means for our time—we're talking 2021 and the next couple of decades—to be a time of covenant renewal for his Church. We don't have to like or be comfortable with what's happening in the world around us. But we can be sure that God is going to bring new life for the Church out of this.

There's the biblical picture of God pruning the tree so that new branches can grow. I'm struck by the number of people—members of St. John's and Christians in general—who are saying that the craziness of today's world has led them to a completely renewed appreciation for who God is. The circus of the world is helping us see all the more clearly what God has done for us in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, and see all the more clearly who we are called to be in the world. I personally feel like God has pruned me in the last couple of years. I don't like being pruned. Like many of us here, I've had to let go of some things, like the notion I could stand above it all, the notion I could understand everything that's happening, the notion that the world is going to work the way I predict. Well God has been pruning me of those delusions; and thank God! Thank God I'm not in control. Thank God we're in his good hands.

There's a danger that comes with living in the most amazing country the world has ever known. God warned Israel of this danger. After a while it's too easy to get comfortable. We start confusing faith in God with worldly, temporary security. Especially since WWII, we've tended to take our wealth and peace and good fortune for granted. It's not that those beautiful gifts from God are bad. Far from it. It's that we become rooted in those worldly comforts and security. Trust in the God who saves us can slowly evaporate. Over time we put ourselves and our work and our politics and our agendas and our plans at the center. We start seeing God as just kind of a helper on the side who comes in and blesses our work and our plans. And that of course is backwards. God is teaching us through today's world that the crucified and risen Savior Jesus is the center. Jesus is our only future, and everything else is peripheral, everything we do is just praise and worship.

The Ephesians lesson gives us another angle on it: This is the one, the old favorite where Paul tells us to put on the whole armor of God. First of all our mistake according to Paul is that we start thinking we're just fighting worldly battles. If today's world is just about human flesh and blood stuff, then I'll put on my typical worldly battle armor. I'll put on my breastplate of self-awareness, the shoes of my preferred political party, my shield of social connections, my helmet of higher education, and my sword of quick verbal comebacks; and I'll tie it all together with my money belt. And with this worldly armor—which is all good God-given stuff by the way—we fight the current worldly political battles actually thinking we're going to finally come out on top. We've just got to get everyone to think the way we do. But Paul reminds us that we're up against something much bigger: “our struggles are not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” As long as human beings forget what Paul says here, we'll keep blaming each other—and that will devolve into blaming certain groups of people—for all the troubles of the world. Paul is beautifully pointing out all human beings are standing

on the same battlefield with the same enemy, and unfortunately that enemy is always going to be too big for us.

But nevertheless, he says, stand up. Did you notice how he says *stand up* **four times** in this little paragraph? We are to stand against the powers of darkness. Don't run away from the giant. Don't play defense. God has given us his own armor in Jesus Christ. Think of that—God gives his own armor to human beings. Not only does he save us and give us eternal life; he gives us the Holy Spirit, the power to live fearless, victorious, positive, generous lives in this world. Paul describes all the wonderful separate pieces of armor in the passage, but in the end of course it's all about Jesus. Jesus is our truth, our righteousness, our glory, our proclamation, our purpose. He is our solid rock, our salvation. He is bigger than the cosmic powers of this present darkness.

We can put on the armor of God, put on Christ. Trust in Jesus and stand up on this battlefield. What is God up to in today's world? What truth can we tell and show our families and our friends and neighbors and coworkers? What is God going to bring out of all this confusion and turmoil? The answer is a resurrection. Renewal. Total victory.