

1 June 2008
Pentecost 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Our House”

Text: Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28 (Romans 3:21-28; Matthew 7:15-29)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness was now over. Moses and the people of Israel could look across the Jordan River and see the Promised Land. They had been here before, but turned back in unbelief. Now, Moses urges them, do not turn back, and do not doubt. This time, *remember*. Remember all that God has done for you, and has promised to continue to do for you. Remember the plagues and how He delivered you from the slavery and oppression of the Egyptians. Remember the pillar of cloud and fire that He led you with, and protected you with. Remember the miracle of the Red Sea, where through those waters you were saved and your enemy was destroyed. Remember how the Lord God fed you with manna and quail, and gave you water to drink from a rock. Remember how He gave you the Law and the instructions for the Tabernacle, so that the Lord could dwell with His people in mercy and forgiveness. Remember how your clothing and shoes did not wear out all these years. Remember how even though you were faithless, God remained faithful. Remember, and do not forget. And remembering, believe. And believing, proclaim these great and awesome deeds and faithfulness to your children. And so put your faith and hope, your love and trust, in the Lord, and Him alone.

40 years earlier, the people did not do this. Why? Because they listened to false prophets. They listened to the ten spies who came back from checking out the land, who told them the people were too big and the cities were too strong – they could not enter and conquer this land. And they were right – *if* they had to rely on themselves. . . . But the people were not to trust and rely in themselves and their own strength, but trust in God who would fight for them – just as He had done against the Egyptians. And there were two spies, two *true* prophets, who spoke this Word of God faithfully, who encouraged the people to faith, who pointed to the Lord and His strength. But their voices were drowned out – by the ten against them, and by the hardness of the people’s hearts. And their reward, the bad fruit

produced by the word of the false prophets, was 40 more years in the wilderness. 40 more years of wandering. 40 more years of needless pain and struggle.

But it was not 40 years without God. And it was not 40 wasted years. But 40 years of learning. So that now, 40 years later, on the border of the Promised Land once again, this was not the same old Israel, but a *new* Israel. Literally! The generation of those whose hearts were hard and who had listened to the false prophets had died in the wilderness, and now it was a new Israel that looked across the Jordan. And so Moses tells them: *remember*. Remember what happened here 40 years ago. Remember all that has happened for the past 40 years. But most of all, remember the promises of God. That the God who chose you, the God who rescued you, the God who has led and protected you, will not now leave you on your own! He will see you all the way home.

And so, Moses sets before them a blessing and a curse. The blessing of faith, or the curse of idolatry. The blessing of trust, or the curse of self-reliance. The blessing of God's promises, or the curse of forgetfulness. 40 years earlier, the people put their faith in themselves, would not trust, and forgot the Lord's faithfulness. 40 years later, would they make the same mistake again?

Will *you*?

Yes, you! For you are God's new Israel, His people, wandering in the wilderness of this world of sin and death. **You** He saved from the slavery and oppression of your sins. **You** He saved through the miracle of Holy Baptism, where through those waters you were saved and your enemy was destroyed. **You** He has sustained, feeding you with His body to eat and His blood to drink. **You** He has given His Word of forgiveness and the preaching of His Word to strengthen and encourage you. **You** He has provided with food, drink, clothing, shoes, and all that you need for this body and life. And He has promised to be with you always. Do you know these things? Do you remember?

Yet how do we act? In fear, or in faith? Like an old Israel, or a new Israel? And on whom do we rely? On whose strength? On whose wisdom? On whose Word? Do we listen to the prophets who speak in the name of the Lord? Or do we listen to the false prophets of this world, who speak a very different word? What challenges lie before you that are too big? What situations are too hopeless? What sins too strong? What doubts are hardening your heart? What gods in this world are pulling you

away from the only true God, the only faithful God, the only giving God? It's easy to criticize old Israel, but that shoe fits pretty comfortably on our foot, doesn't it? St. Paul was right - *"There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* None of us would get into the Promised Land if it were up to us.

But that is exactly God's good news for Israel! His Israel then and His Israel here now. It's not up to you! Against the challenges that are too big for you, the situations too hopeless for you, and the sins too strong for you, there is One who fights for you. Whose faithfulness does not depend on our faithfulness, but who is faithful even when we are faithless. Because who we are doesn't change who He is. And who He is is always the same - the One who has come to rescue us and give us life, and lead us to our land of rest.

And how He did that is the One thing that Israel was to remember above all things. For when Moses told them to *"teach [these words] to your children . . . writing them on the doorposts of your house"* - they would immediately think of that one thing: the time when those doorposts were painted in blood. The blood of the Passover Lamb. The blood that protected and saved them from the angel of death, broke the back of their enemy, and set them free. And so not just any words would they write on their doorposts, but these words . . . of the Lamb of God.

And so to this Lamb Paul also points us. Yes, *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified - rescued by God, made right with God - by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, who God put forward as a propitiation - a substitute - by his blood, to be received in faith . . . because in his divine forbearance he . . . what? - passed over former sins."*

His blood. Passed over. Paul did not use those words by accident! But wants you to **remember**, as Moses told the people to **remember**, what God has done for you in Jesus. For He is the Lamb of God whose blood painted the wood of the cross and so rescued us from death. In Him our sins are passed over and not held against us. In Him we have been rescued from our slavery to sin and given a new life. . . . And can we *boast* of any of this? Is any of this our doing? No. It is all the work of our Saviour, given to us by grace, and received by faith.

So now, God's new Israel . . . what will you do? There is before you a blessing and a curse. The blessing of faith, or the curse of idolatry. The blessing of trust, or the curse of self-reliance. The blessing of God's promises, or the curse of forgetfulness.

As you look to the future, and the challenges before you, there are many false prophets calling you. Many wolves in sheep's clothing. Many calling you to the sands of Sinai, to turn back to fear instead of forward in faith, to rely on yourself and your strength instead of God and the rock of His Word and Sacraments. For, they are telling you, the people and cities, the challenges and struggles, are too big and too strong. . . . *Who are those false prophets today? Who speak not the Word of the Lord but their own word? Who point not to Christ but to comfort? Who point not to wisdom but to wealth? Who point not to prayer but to power? Who are the false prophets today, who promise not saving but success; not forgiveness but fame; who point not to the cross, but to conquest. Who are those false prophets today? Who were they yesterday? And who will they be tomorrow? For they will always be around. But they have all this in common: "and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*

But there is one house that will not fall, for it is built on the rock of God's Word. There is one house that will never face foreclosure, for it has been paid for by blood that is worth far more than anything in this world. There is one house that will last forever, for it is not built by human hands, but by the hands once pierced with nails and laid in a tomb, but now raised from the dead and alive forevermore. There is one house where the blood of the Lamb still keeps you safe, and where you will both lie down and sleep in death, and rise to life eternal. And you are in it, for you are in Christ. It is the church.

And so there are no challenges too big, no situations too hopeless, no sins too strong. If it were up to you, that would all be true. But the Lord alone is your rock and your righteousness. The Lord will fight for you. The Lord has redeemed you with His own blood. The Lord has brought you safely here, and will bring you safely home. *So let the rains fall, and the floods come, and the winds blow and beat against this house! It will not fall. You are safe. You have a firm foundation. Put your faith and hope, your love and trust, in Him alone.*

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.