

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Joshua 24:1-26
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
October 14, 2018

KIDS' MESSAGE

Kids, this is my dad's old duffel bag. Before I was even born, World War II got started and my dad was drafted to serve in the U.S. Navy. He had to put all of his clothes and stuff into this one canvas bag, climb on a ship and sail away to a far distant country called New Guinea. What did dad have to leave behind? His wife, little boy, house, family and friends.

I want to act this out. Who will pretend to be my dad, Charly? My mom, Olga? My big brother, Rod? The rest of Charly's family and friends? Charly, grab your duffel bag and head for New Guinea. Family and friends, wave "Goodbye."

How did Charly feel? Sad, afraid, lonely... How did family and friends feel? Who would go with Charly? Not Olga or Rodney or family. God went with Charly! (Who will be God?) So God went with Charly, but Charly didn't know it. . . Charly only went to church on Christmas and Easter if my mom made him. He didn't know that God loved and cared for him every day while he was gone. Charly didn't pray to God. Everybody back home was praying for Charly though.

After two whole years, the war ended and Charly got to come home. Did God come with Charly? Yes! But, Charly didn't know it. Then a new pastor came to the church in their town. It was a very rainy summer and the farmers were having a hard time getting their hay into the barns. The new pastor went and worked in the fields to help them. He really cared about the people. When Charly heard that, he decided that it might be worth going to church and seeing what this pastor had to say. Was God there in church? Yes! When Charly listened to the pastor preaching, whom did Charly hear speaking? Jesus! And did Charly believe it when Jesus said he loved Charly and always wanted to be Charly's best friend and savior? Yes! When Charly heard and believed that, he loved God back. And did Charly try to trust and follow Jesus? Yes! All of the rest of his life, he loved and trusted God. And Charly taught Rodney, Judi and me to do the same.

Your parents, grandparents, whoever brought you here today, they are trying to do what Charly did. They are trying to love and trust God, listen to what Jesus has to say and to follow Jesus every day. Today these 13 confirmation students are saying that's what they want to do too. God is here. God loves us. And God is happy that we are here too! Thanks be to God. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

If you check out the **Faith-Life Timelines** that our 13 confirmands have displayed in the Fellowship Hall, you will see that these kids have experienced wonderful, joyful life events. They have also experienced the loss of fifteen grandparents, one parent and some pets. They have experienced divorce, moving here from some other town, friends moving away, changing churches, sickness, deadly illness and injury. These are just the things that they had courage enough to put down on paper. The Faith-Life Timelines are supposed to **reflect places where they think God has been there for them**. These thirteen teens have some history. Some history with God. . .

The people of Israel had some history with God too. Blessed to be a blessing. Slaves in Egypt. Rescued from the pursuing Egyptian army. They had wandered in the wilderness for years. Then God brought them to the Promised Land where they could live in peace and prosperity. Following their old captain, **Joshua**, they were ready to settle into their new land, homes and lives. Joshua, in today's text, challenges them to decide whether they are going to **love, trust and follow God** in this new place and adventure. They had a choice to make. First Joshua reminded them of all the ways God had blessed and cared for them in the past. Then he challenged, "**Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, 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. . .**"

My dad, **Charly Pedersen**, had no choice when he was drafted into the U.S. Navy during World War II. New wife, first child, good job – pack your things into that old duffel bag and head for New Guinea. With fear, trembling and sadness, Mom, Rodney, family and friends were left behind. Would he be killed? Would they wait for him to come home? For Charly, God was not a part of his thinking. His wife, Olga, prayed, wrote letters and waited.

What about our confirmands? Tenth grade. Sports. Arts. Jobs. A couple of years and they will be graduating. Military? Further education? Job? Marriage? Will there be lots of joy and celebration? Yes. Will there be trouble and pain? Yes.

The Israelites just wanted to settle down on their new land, earn a living, raise their children and experience the kind of abundant life that God longs to bless God's people with. God promised that they could live deep and rich in relationship with God, each other, neighbors and earth. Charly Pedersen, over in World War II New Guinea dreamt of returning home, buying some land alongside a body of water, having more children and then doing a good job of providing for them. His own father had died when Charly was four. Charly had gone to live with distant relatives. Finally, in his teen years, he was able to live with his mom and brother again.

What hopes and dreams do you have for your own future? What will abundant life look like for you? Can you see God moving there somewhere in your future? God walked with the Israelites from before they were conceived in their mother's womb, from the Garden of Eden, through their slavery, escape and settling in their new homeland. God was there on the peaks of joy and in the darkest valleys of death. **They just didn't always remember that, trust it was true, feel God's loving embrace. . .**

My dad, Charly Pedersen, did not realize that God was there for him all along, from conception, through birth, death of his father, farmed out to distant relatives, back home to his mother again, meeting my mother, giving birth to my brother, off to war and home again. It wasn't until Dad realized that **God is not just some distant being**, but rather is **as close as a baby in arms**, an **embrace during heartbreak**, a **splash of baptismal waters**, a **sip of wine** and a **morsel of bread**. When Dad came home from the War and witnessed a pastor helping farmers in their time of need, he actually got a **glimpse of Jesus loving and caring for everyday people** in their everyday lives. Dad started going to church. He didn't understand how much God loved him until he witnessed God's love in other people and then heard Jesus speaking to him through **Bible, sermons** and **sacraments** of water, bread and wine. Have you heard Jesus speaking words of love, forgiveness, healing and power to you? Has God been there for you in times

of joy and celebration? In times of struggle and defeat? Have you seen God standing right there with you? Have you felt God's Spirit rising up within you? Does God embrace you in the good times? Carry you in the tough times?

Whom will they follow? Joshua spoke to those ancient people of God, "Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, 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. . ." Then he went on, "but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Before my dad tasted God's love for him, he came to church on Christmas and Easter, if Mom begged and pleaded to get him there. Once he experienced how much God loved and cared for him, Dad never missed worship. He led our family in prayers at mealtime. He gave his time and money to make sure the church could **keep spreading the good news of God's faithful love and care**. And Dad died peacefully, sitting at his kitchen table, knowing that God, home and family awaited his arrival on the other side.

What about you? Is God real? Is confirmation a religious test to be passed before carrying on with **"real life?"** Is God there in your deer stand, fishing boat, kitchen, when you are stargazing in the back yard? Did God really adopt you into God's precious and beloved family when you were **baptized**? Does Jesus really pour out his own body and blood in love for you at the **Lord's Table**? **Does Jesus speak to you** when you read the Bible or listen to a sermon?

Every one of us made a choice whether or not to be here today. Thirteen confirmands came to publically declare to all of us that they are **glad to be children of God** and that they **choose to love, trust and follow Jesus** all of their days. Their **parents committed them into God's keeping** when they were baptized. Today, they are **invited to claim God's loving promises for their own lives and future**.

Years ago, parents made promises to raise their children to know and love Jesus. The congregation promised to help with that. And God made some promises too.

“You are mine. I created you. I love you. You are my precious child. And I will never abandon or give up on you. I died for you and I will live with you, every day of your life and for all of eternity.”

Today, our **confirmands make some promises to love, trust and follow Jesus**. I am very hopeful that they intend to keep them. I have seen beautiful things in their lives and faith. **Decide this day whom you will serve. Our choice or God’s? Without God’s constant love and help**, we will always **wander away from God** and quickly **start to believe** that we are **carrying the whole world on our own shoulders**. That we are **all alone** in the world. We **will stumble and fall**, again and again. **Our most trustworthy hope** for today and for our future is **God**. Today **we are here for God. Far better yet**, today and forever, **God will be here for us**. That’s **God’s promise**. Thanks be to God. Amen.