

On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the Testimony.¹² Then the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai and traveled from place to place until the cloud came to rest in the Desert of Paran.¹³ They set out, this first time, at the LORD's command through Moses. ... So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest.³⁴ The cloud of the LORD was over them by day when they set out from the camp.³⁵ Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you."³⁶ Whenever it came to rest, he said, "Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel." Numbers 10:11-13,33-36

What Would Make Today a Good Start?

Today is Confirmation Day. That's a big deal to all of us who have ever been confirmed. In fact, in many ways, confirmation feels very much like a graduation. For youth confirmands, it's the conclusion of two years of study. For adult confirmands, it's the close of 6 months or more of weekly meetings. And it's natural for us to feel like this is the big finish. But confirmation is not a graduation. It is not the end of something, no matter how much it feels like that to these young people before us this morning and no matter how much it felt like that to us in the past. Today is much more a beginning than an ending. It's the start of the next phase in the Christian lives of these young people. Today marks a day of setting out in their faith, a day when they begin to take responsibility for their lives of faith. I find strong parallel in the experience of Israel. This morning, we're considering the day that Israel set out from Mt. Sinai. In their experience I hope to answer a question that should be on the mind of every one of us: **what would make today a good start?**

I.

The answer speaks to the purpose of catechism class. Catechism class is all about preparing for a life of faith. The grade means nothing. The program exists to strengthen the faith of the students. **What would make today a good start? Setting out with our faith in order.**

During the fourteen months that Israel was at Mt. Sinai, God taught his people. He gave them the old covenant. God gave them the ten commandments. He taught them the way that a Christian is supposed to live. We do the same thing in our classes. We work hard to relate those lessons to life in a sinful world. God also taught them the creed. Now, you won't find the words of the Apostles' Creed anywhere in the Bible, let alone in the account of Mt. Sinai. But the creed teaches us who God is and what he's done for us. God did teach that at Mt. Sinai. God showed that he is the true God when he descended in fire and smoke on the mountain and the people trembled with fear in his presence. And he proclaimed himself as the Creator, just as we do in the first article of the Creed: "I believe in the God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." He proclaimed himself as the Savior when he told Israel, **"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."** That deliverance from Egypt taught them about the greater deliverance of Jesus Christ, which we proclaim in the second article. And he taught them about faith as the prerequisite to obedience because he told that that he was God who delivered them before he told them, "You shall have no other Gods." He taught them about the work of the Holy Spirit, as we do in the third article.

God taught them still more, just as we do. He taught them about his presence, about his love and his mercy when he gave them the Old Testament sacraments. God gave regulations about circumcision, which was the Old Testament equivalent of baptism. And he gave them the whole sacrificial system – the sin offerings and the guilt offerings and the fellowship offerings – all of which served as the Old Testament form of communion. God prepared his people for worthy reception of those sacraments by teaching them how and when to participate in them.

God prepared his people to live as his children. Then they set out for the Promised Land, full of hope and joy and faith. They set out with God's blessing and the ark of the covenant going before them. But it was not the end of the journey. It was the beginning. That's true for us today, too. Confirmation is a joyous day, a day in which we celebrate the beginning of the next phase in the spiritual lives of these young people. They set out with hope and joy and faith and the blessing of God. We all remember the day that we were confirmed and set out on our journey, a journey in which we had to take ever greater responsibility for our lives of faith.

But today is only a beginning. Do you remember how the journey of Israel went? Within days of leaving Mt. Sinai, the people began to grumble and complain about how hard the trip through the desert was, about how tired they were of eating manna – the bread that God dropped on them from heaven, about how tyrannical they thought Moses was. By the time they reached the border of the Promised Land, they refused to go in. So God condemned them to forty years of wandering in the desert until the entire generation of adults died out. Too many Israelites fell away. Too many Israelites who were at Mt. Sinai, who benefited from the instruction of the Lord, who set out with joy, failed to trust in God when life got difficult. They grumbled and complained and again and again God disciplined them. God killed those who turned away from him. Their unfaithfulness delayed God's blessings and made their lives on this earth much harder than they had to be.

How many of us confirmed Lutherans have let the hardships of life distract us from God? How many of us have grumbled and complained at the way that God has taken care of us? Do you think that these confirmands will be exempt from pride and sin? They are not leaving sin behind today. The devil is going to use the pride of their hearts against them, just as he does for every one of us grownups. The devil is going to try his best to lead them astray. If he succeeds, they may echo the words that someone said to me once: "My confirmation means nothing to me now." The devil is our enemy. He wants nothing more than to make a mockery of the promise these young people will make today. He wants to lead every one of us to hell. Sometime he succeeds because we are sinners, just like the children of Israel were. When we fall into sin, we have no one to blame but ourselves. We're sinners and we prove that we deserve nothing from God except death and hell.

But God has had mercy on us poor sinners. We saw that mercy this morning when we baptized one of our confirmands. In baptism, God washed away all of our sin. Baptism applies Jesus' work to us. Jesus died and he rose to pay for all the pride in our hearts. Jesus died and rose to wipe away all record of our grumbling and complaining. Jesus came to us in baptism, he came to us in the gospel that we've heard in church and Sunday school and catechism class and he gave us faith in what he has done. Jesus comes to us today in the gospel and he says, "I forgive you for all your sins. I have washed them all away." That forgiveness takes away the hell and the death we deserve and it gives us life in heaven. By the grace of God, in just a few minutes, we will receive the Lord's Supper. We will receive the very body and blood of Christ which he shed on the cross to take our sins away. We will receive forgiveness again, so that we grow in our faith and remain on the path to heaven.

II.

God had a plan for Israel. When they set out, God was with them. He guided Israel with a cloud and with the ark of the covenant. God's presence is the key to every spiritual journey. **What would make today a good start? Setting out with God to guide us.**

The cloud was the visible showing of God's presence with them. He appeared as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The ark of the covenant served a similar purpose. The ark was constructed at Mt. Sinai. God taught his people that he appeared above the atonement cover, the lid of the ark. The cloud and the ark were God's way of teaching his people that he really was there. Throughout the forty years that the people were in the wilderness, they followed the cloud and the ark. When it was time for them to move on, the cloud would lift up and go before them. When it was time to stop, it would come back down to earth. And it would rest, sometimes for months, on the ark. During that time, the people stayed where they were. God taught Israel to follow his plan and to trust in his presence and his love.

God has a plan for us, too. Our lives are a journey to heaven. God's presence is absolutely essential for our journey. But how do we see that presence? We don't have the ark of the covenant going on before us. We don't have a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. How do we know that God is with us? Some people will tell you to trust your feelings. Reach into your heart – that's where you'll find God. But the Bible never tells us to reach into ourselves to find God. The Bible always points us away from our hearts because our hearts are sinful. So much of what we think is God leading us is really just our sinful pride deceiving us.

God doesn't tell us what to do the way he did for Israel. He doesn't tell us which way to turn and where to stop and how long to stay there. As we journey through life, buying a house or not buying a house, moving or staying put, getting married or staying single – in these things we are free. God lets us choose. He does not let us choose to sin. But he does let us choose how to live. The only thing that matters is why we choose this or that. Do we get a new job because we can better care for our families that way or because we're greedy and we

can afford better stuff with that job? Are we getting married with the plan to love and honor our spouse, or are we selfishly hoping to fill a hole in our lives?

But while we journey through this life, God is with us. He rules the world. Nothing happens without his permission. Jesus said that he would be with us Christians to the very end of the age. As long as we live here, our Savior is watching over us. He doesn't give us a pillar of cloud to see it. He gives us the Scriptures which proclaim it. Jesus says that wherever two or three come together in his name, there he is with us. Every time we gather for worship or Bible study or to do his work, Jesus is with us to bless us with the gospel. In a very special way, Jesus is with us in communion. In, with and under the bread and wine, we will receive the very body and blood of Christ.

Jesus does guide us. Not through feelings, but through his word. He shows us what is right and wrong. He teaches us the great principles of the faith and then he calls on us to apply those principles. And he does live in our hearts by faith. Our faith hears the word and knows what God wants. Unfortunately, the sinner in us still does all he can to distract us and to twist that word. But the Holy Spirit guides the believer into all truth – as long as the believer's heart and mind are focused on the word of God.

In just a few moments, these five young people are going to promise to suffer death and all rather than fall away from the teachings of the Word of God. Will they keep that promise? How many young people have stood where they will stand – how many adults have stood where they will stand and made that promise? And how many have failed to keep it? How many times have we rung our hands over the loss of our young people?

Sin has the power to destroy the faith of every person here, whether this is your confirmation day or the fiftieth anniversary of your confirmation day. If we follow the sinner in our hearts, our faith will die. What will keep these young people faithful to the Lord? The gospel in word and sacrament. Coming and hearing the absolution – the pronouncement that their sins are forgiven, coming and hearing about all that Jesus has done for them and how much he has loved them, coming to the sacrament and receiving the body and blood of Christ. That is how God forgives us. That is how God strengthens us. That is how God moves us to keep this promise. That's not just true for young people. It is true for all of us. Today is the day for all of us to admit that by ourselves, we could never remain faithful. But today is also the day to hear Jesus say, "I forgive you." Today is a day to rejoice in God's forgiveness and to recommit ourselves to hearing that word and journeying with him.

Confirmation day is a wonderful day. It's a day to celebrate. But we are not celebrating the end of the journey. We're celebrating the beginning of a new phase in the journey. We're celebrating the growth in faith of these young people and the gift of God we have all received through Christ, our Savior. May the Holy Spirit fill our hearts with faith and keep us on the road to heaven. Amen.