

OT Text: Joshua 24:2-7;11-14

NT Text: Philippians 1:2-11

As I stand in the pulpit this morning and look out at you sitting in the pews, I see a lot of people who fall into different categories. I see members of this parish that recently joined us. I see members who have been here almost as long as I have which is coming up on 13 years. I also see charter members who started this parish 30 years ago. I see clergy who served this parish in years past and I see clergy who are currently serving here. I also see friends. Friends who are members of other parishes. Friends who have joined us for many events. Friends who have supported us at different times in several different ways. Friends with whom we celebrate regularly. There are some whom I see every week. There are some whom I see once in a while. And yet there are some whom I haven't seen for years. There are young children. There are teenagers. There are middle age parents. And there are some whom God has blessed with many years of life. And it thrills my heart that we can all come together at one time and in one place to celebrate this special occasion of the 30th anniversary of St. Matthias.

When I look out and see this type of special gathering my mind can't help but to think of one of the Old Testament yearly feasts. You may know already of which Feast I speak. Every September or October, depending on how the weeks fell in a given year, the Israelites would come together around the tabernacle and dwell in tents for a week. This was known as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Festival of Booths. And today I want to draw a parallel between that Old Testament celebration and what we do here today as we gather and celebrate the 30th anniversary of St. Matthias.

One of the interesting aspects about the Feast of Tabernacles and, in reality, most of the Feasts of God was that of remembrance.

If we think about our own lives we realize how special gatherings often involve remembrance. A married couple might reminisce about years past while they sit at an anniversary dinner. They remember where they once were and where they are now. A birthday gathering might involve putting up pictures of an individual from years ago. A family reunion will inevitably involve a lot of storytelling. Even at funerals people laugh and cry over memories of the one who passed.

We do a lot of remembrance in Church as well. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ with the words, "Do this *in remembrance* of Me". Our Christmas celebration every year takes us again to the stable. Our Holy Week observances take us to the Upper Room and the Cross and the Empty Tomb year after year. As Christians we are a people who celebrate and worship not just with the here and now (or even the future) in mind but also with remembrance - remembrance of all that God has done on our behalf.

The Feast of Tabernacles was no different. It was a feast not just concerned with the dwelling of tents in the wilderness but with the whole of their history from the time they left Egypt. This Feast drew them back to the beginning of when God freed them from slavery and brought them through the wilderness

all the way to the Promised Land. The remembrance would not be about just one period or movement of God, not just about one special event but about the complete opus - the complete work of God.

While this Exodus is, indeed, one period of time in the history of God's people it really is the entire story of God's work *en toto*. It is the story placed under veil where Christ freed us from our bondage to sin and death and Who brings us through the wilderness to a great and luscious land that we receive as an inheritance. That story of the Exodus was their story but is also our story. And through such remembrance we, who know the New Testament, might think of the famous words of St. Paul that he wrote in our New Testament lesson this morning, *"I am confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it unto the day of Jesus Christ."* (Philippians 1:6)

That is what God did when the 2nd generation of Israelites crossed the Jordan and conquered Jericho. Colonel Andrew read our Old Testament lesson for us from Joshua 24. And, therein, Joshua records the history of God's dealing with the Israelites. This is what the Israelites would remember about the Exodus.

God began the work when He called one single man, Moses, through a burning bush.

He continued that work when He added Aaron to Moses.

He continued that work as He freed His people through the ten plagues.

He continued that work as He parted the sea.

He continued that work as He both led and protected His people as a cloud and a pillar of fire.

He continued that work as He spoke at Sinai and covenanted with them.

He continued that work as He fed them with manna from heaven and water from a rock.

He continued that work as He provided a Tabernacle through which God would dwell with them.

He continued that work as He provided a successor to Moses in the person of Joshua.

He continued that work as He defeated Jericho without so much as a sword being lifted up.

He continued that work as He drove out the pagan nations and planted His own people in their place.

In it all, those comforting words of St. Paul ring true. *"I am confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it unto the day of Jesus Christ."*

This history, this remembrance is what the Israelites would focus on in the Feast of Tabernacles and it is the same that we focus on during this special occasion. Today we take pause to remember and celebrate the work that God began in St. Matthias 30 years ago and we remain confident of His continued work in her.

I'm not going to tell specific stories or details today. I'm sure some will come up as the day goes on in our individual conversations. But I will draw attention and make similarities to the Exodus. During this 30 year journey, just like many parishes that exist, St. Matthias has accompanied the Israelites. Without much the faithful founding members swiftly left her "captors" who were forcing them to live against

their Godly conscious and orthodox faith. Without a full understanding of how it would all play out they left in 'haste' knowing that it had to be done.

And there were certainly wilderness wanderings. She has had her time of dwelling in tents with no permanent home and, at one point, meeting in a living room for 8 months. She even moved from one end of this 60 mile wide city to the other (from Baytown to Katy). She has had her time of relying solely on God for her daily manna often wondering how the next bill would be paid. She has had her time of questioning exactly how or what God was doing.

Yet, we look back as the Israelites looked back. Going back even further than Moses as Joshua does in our Lesson - from the great faith of a single man whose wife was barren and who was simply told to "Get up and leave your Father's country" - from that single man Abraham God rose up an entire nation working all along through every circumstance and showing forth His plan and His power with every step taken.

We look back.

We look back and see the few who made the decision to leave the Episcopal Church and start this parish to the fifty or sixty who join us every week now. We look back and see the meeting rented spaces to this building built only 6 years ago. We look back and see the checking account that barely met the bills to a larger budget that is not just maintaining what we have within these four walls but is now providing the means for outreach and ministry in the community. We look back and see the Continuing Church groups and sagas through which this parish endured to now being a Parish in a faithful and stable Diocese and Denomination for the past 17 years. We look back and see one group that started a parish to our sister parish St. Barnabas which started from members of this parish and who are now celebrating 7 years and their own new building. We look back and see, and my wife jokes with me about it, she being the only child who was the youth group to now having some 20 children here for Sunday School and Teen get-togethers. We look back and see the Sovereign and Providential hand of God at work.

Is it not amazing and uplifting to see how St. Paul's words are proven to be true time and again, *"I am confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete unto the day of Jesus Christ."*

But as I alluded to earlier in a statement - this is not just the story of St. Matthias. It's not just the story of the Israelites. We are not peculiar ones in that sense. We are not the exception to the rule. It is the story of all our parishes. Furthermore, it's not just the story of our parishes. It's the story of us all as individuals. It is the story of the Christian nation both corporately and individually. It is the story of every individual and every 'body' who has heard God say, "You will be my people and I will be your God."

We look back to the good times and the bad. We look back to the times of lacking and the times of plenty. We look back to the times of weakness and the times of strength. We look back to those times of darkness in our lives and to the times when His light broke through. When we look back and see we can't help but to recognize that God's hand has been and is at work. He removes the obstacles we can't get around. He opens the doors we cannot open. He gives when we cannot find. To use the imagery of the prophet Isaiah, He makes the mountains low and the valleys high. He makes the rough places plain. And in it all the glory of the Lord is revealed.

And so today we gather on this special occasion to look back and to remember and to rejoice. And we can be confident of this very thing - that God will continue the good work He has begun in us unto the day of Jesus Christ. AMEN.