

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for New Year's Eve December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008 and New Year's Day January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009

### **Joshua 1:6-9**

**<sup>6</sup>“Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. <sup>7</sup>Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. <sup>8</sup>Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. <sup>9</sup>Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”**

In the name of our Savior, dear friends,

Does the city of Cibola sound familiar to anyone? Cibola was the name of one of 7 legendary cities of gold, supposedly in the desert Southwest here in North America. In the 1500's when the Spanish conquistadors came north from Mexico, they heard stories from the Indians about these wonderful cities made out of gold. The stories say that the plates and cups were made out of gold as well as most of the city. The Spanish conquistadors led expeditions to try and find them. The Indians knew that these stories were precisely that – stories and legends. But they continued to lead the Spanish on out into the desert on a hopeless quest. The city of gold was always just beyond the horizon, but when they got to the horizon, they found more desert, and frustration and often death. It is quite amazing what people will do to find wealth and fame.

Are there parallels between the futile search for cities of gold, and our quest for prosperity? Does success in life seem to be just beyond our grasp? I suppose a lot has to do with how you define prosperity and success. Like the conquistadors, and Joshua, we are also entering a new land, filled with unknown challenges and unexpected mysteries. Our new land is the new year. And it just so happens that what the Lord shared with Joshua, and what he needed to hear, fits well with what we need to hear as we enter a new year. So let this question guide us today and throughout this coming year.

### **Theme: What Makes A Good Year?**

- 1. Listen To God's Promises**
- 2. Listen To God's Advice**

#### **1. Listen To God's Promises**

First of all, let's set the stage for Joshua. The children of Israel are sitting on the east bank of the Jordan River, waiting to enter the promised land. You would expect that this would be a time of eagerness and joy! They had already defeated some of the enemies on the east bank. They are about to claim the main part of the promised land on the west bank. The 40 years of wandering in the wilderness is over. It's time to claim the land that God had promised. This new generation was ready to go!!

But, there were major concerns on Joshua's mind. First, of all, after 40 years of leadership, Moses was dead. He had just been called home to heaven. How in the world would Joshua be able to fill those sandals? Secondly, the children of Israel were God's people, but they were not the easiest group of people to lead. They had whined and complained and rebelled. This new generation often followed the same pattern: like father, like son. Thirdly, the Canaanite tribes weren't going to give up their land without a fight. They would still have to face powerful armies. And there would be casualties. Would the people give up?

As we stand on the riverbank of a new year, ready to cross over, we too might feel the same emotions. The Lord surely has brought all of us through a lot, individually and as a congregation. He has blessed and guided us. But what will the new year hold for us? There are signs that things could be

tough or tougher financially. Some of our members have lost jobs or homes. We don't know what will happen to our families, or whom the Lord might call home in the next year. There is the darkness of the unknown to face, and perhaps we are better off not knowing!! As we enter a new year, we need to listen to God's promises! Listen to what he said to Joshua: **"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them."** Please note: if God gives a promise, you can depend that it will happen. Ever since Abraham 500 years before, The Lord had promised this land to his people. And you can be sure that God is going to keep every one of his promises. So Joshua, be strong and courageous!

People of God today, be strong and courageous! The Lord didn't give us this same promise, but you can be just as confident that every promise the Lord has given will be fulfilled! Verse 9 has a promise that does apply to us! **"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."** God had said it another way for all of us, as quoted in the NT: **God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'** Hebrews 13:5-6.

What is it that we have most to fear in the new year? I would say that it is not financial hardship, or physical sickness, but the things that would war against our soul and our faith. So St. Paul encourages us: **"Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."** Eph. 6:10-11. The word "devil" means false accuser, and he would like to accuse us of being terrible sinners, which is true, but then would like to persuade us that there is no hope for us, we might as well give up, which is the lie. God has promised: **"For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."** Col. 1:13,14.

When we think that our situation is so hopeless, that maybe God has forgotten all about us, then hear Jesus' promise: **"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. [7] Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."** Luke 12:6,7. After all, if the Lord cares even for the sparrows, he will certainly care for you and me. Jesus didn't die for sparrows, but he did give his life for you and me, so that we might be in his family forever.

That just scratches the surface of all the promises that the Lord has given to us, and like Joshua, we can depend on the fact that if the Lord makes a promise, he is going to keep it!! So dear friends, as we enter the new year, not only listen to God's promises, but also

## 2. Listen To God's Advice

The Lord told Joshua: **"Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the laws my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."** How was Joshua going to be successful in entering the new land and winning the victories? Did he need to recruit the right generals? Train his fighters better? Develop new military strategies? God's advice for success does not jive with the world's advice. **"Do not let this book of the law – that's the Torah, or all of God's teaching - depart from your mouth."** If it's going to be in your mouth, that means you're going to be speaking it out loud to others. **"Meditate on it day and night,"** that's personal study where you ponder God's word in your heart. **"so that you may be careful to do everything written in it."** The more we learn and study and digest it and share it, the better we'll be at obeying it.

So, you want to be prosperous and successful in 2009? What the Lord told Joshua still fits. It's time to renew our dedication to get into the Word of God. I know I'm speaking to the choir, but how many of you have been to a Bible class lately? Sunday morning attendance can always be better. Think about it for this Sunday, as we begin a new year of growing in the knowledge of God and his grace.

When's the last time you opened your Bible? We have some other Bible studies, Women's, Teen's, home studies, Breakfast and those are all helpful – but they are only once a week. How about your study at home – ponder God's Word day and night, is what the Lord told Joshua. Do these things, and you'll be prosperous and successful.

Now remember that what God defines as prosperity may be a bit different than the world's definition. In the world, you've got to be #1, have a better job, have the nicest things compared to those around you. What's success in God's eyes? How about a strong faith that can withstand the storms of life? How about a Christian family that really loves one another? How about a church family that really loves one another?

So what are you hoping for in 2009? Like the conquistadors, are you searching for your city of gold? Don't go on a wild goose chase after things that God never promised. But he has promised us this: **“Nothing shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** And that means that someday, you'll also find that very real city of gold: **“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.”** And the success story is this: To find this city of gold, you don't need to be lucky and search for hidden clues. When you have Jesus, you know the way there! You have everything you need! That's what I call success! Have a Blessed 2009! Amen.