

Psalm 104:24-35
John 7:37-39

Day of Pentecost, Holy Communion
Midway Presbyterian Church
June 4, 2017

Rivers of Living Water

Introduction to the Psalm

Pentecost calls our attention to the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power the Spirit brings to the church to carry out the mission of Christ. But our psalm pushes us into other spheres—the life and well-being of all creation. Listen to these words from Psalm 104:24-35 . . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In John 7 and 8 we read of Jesus' appearance at the Jewish festival of Booths, or Tabernacles, known as *sukkot*, and perhaps the most prominent of all the Jewish festivals. The people were to gather together in Jerusalem, not only to remember God's provision in the wilderness, but also to look forward to that time when all nations will flow to this city to worship the Lord. Gentiles were also invited to the festival. Listen to these words from John 7:37-38 . . .

Sermon

Earlier in that seventh chapter of our John 7, the evangelist tells us that there were conversations and disputes during the Feast of Tabernacles. How striking! Here the community of faith has gathered for that harvest festival which celebrated their history as a pilgrim people—living in booths or tents during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, having no permanent city, with no compass for guidance, only trust in God. These were people who at one time were no people, just slaves in Egypt, whose future was at best uncertain, save for trust in God's promise. According to Fred Craddock, these people who had neither a past nor a future, save for God, they now reject Jesus because he claims God as his past and his future.

Jesus says he comes from God; they say he comes from Galilee and that is not an adequate past. Jesus says he is going again to God; they say he is going to live among the Gentiles and that is an inadequate future. (*John*, p. 61)

The first-century historian Josephus refers to this Feast of Tabernacles as the most important of the Jewish festivals. In 1 Kings 8:2 we read that this was the festival during which Solomon dedicated the temple. Originally a harvest festival rooted in the memory of Israel's wilderness wanderings, it came to be associated with the great hope for a time when God's life-giving presence would flow out in rivers from the temple, like water had flowed from the rock in the wilderness.

Part of the symbolism of the Feast of Tabernacles was a reminder of the water given in the desert in a time of need to their fathers. On each of the seven days of the festival a full golden pitcher was carried in procession to the temple. But on the last and great day, that rite was dispensed with; for now they were celebrating the entrance into Palestine with its springs and water courses. It was in such a setting that Christ promised a *living water*, abundant, satisfying, overflowing. What he offers is the assuaging of our deepest spiritual thirst, the satisfying of our inner needs and longings. But beyond that, he promises that through him we shall be a strength and inspiration to others round about us; no longer a stumbling block, but a witness, an example, a blessing.

So Jesus' offer of *living water* is set in contrast to the water of the Jewish festival and comes as something new and different. What Jesus promises is not more of the same—more rules, more religion, more ritual—but something unique, the transforming gift of the Spirit which produces life.

On the last day of the festival Jesus cried out:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.”

Psalm 104 recognizes that God is the source and giver of life, not just for us, but for all creation; and furthermore that human beings can live in a relationship with God that elicits praise:

O LORD, how manifold are your works!
 In wisdom you have made them all;
 the earth is full of your creatures. (v. 24)

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
 I will sing praise to my God while I have being. (v. 33)

Someone told of returning from the starkly brilliant desert of Arizona and being struck by the relatively lush greenery on the plains of Colorado. The scene brought to mind the experience of Katharine Lee Bates in 1893, when she came to Colorado and noticed the “spacious skies,” “the amber waves of grain,” the “fruited plain,” and perhaps most breathtakingly, the “purple mountain majesty” of the Rockies. It provided the inspiration for her writing the words of the hymn, “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies.”

But when you look about today, it’s not hard to find a dryness in the land, a dryness in leadership, a dryness in the church—something like Ezekiel’s “Valley of Dry Bones.” There are people whose dreams have about dried up. They are thirsty and in need of living water.

Reminds me of that lovely hymn,

Like the woman at the well I was seeking
 For things that could not satisfy;
 And then I heard my Savior speaking:
 "Draw from my well that never shall run dry".

Fill my cup Lord, I lift it up, Lord!
 Come and quench this thirsting of my soul;
 Bread of heaven, Feed me till I want no more
 Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole!
 (“Fill My Cup, Lord,” Richard Blanchard)

Tom Long says that here Jesus is speaking directly to human yearning. All people are thirsty for something—for meaning, for money, for knowledge, for pleasure, for power and fame. People are so parched, they go on the internet, saying and doing sad, stupid, and sick things. They use mind-altering drugs—superficial but deadly thirst-quenchers. They drive themselves relentlessly, becoming workaholics.

Advertisers know our thirst and are essentially saying, “Let anyone who is thirsty, come here.” Diets? “Lose the weight you want, eating the foods you love.” Cars? “Don’t let it pass you by.” Anti-aging creams? “Correct wrinkles and fine lines before it’s too late.” Fragrances? “Sizzles with surprising femininity.” “Bespeaks masculinity.”

Jesus’ invitation speaks to people who have tried what the world has to offer and found it unsatisfying, at best a momentary balm, but of no lasting benefit. Hollow promises and false advertising. His words echo the prophet Isaiah, when he said:

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
 and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
 Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
 Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food. (Isaiah 55:1-2)

United Church of Christ pastor Lillian Daniel told of a conversation she had with a young police officer after she and some other Christians had been arrested inside a government building while protesting unfair labor practices. Just before they were arrested, they had been singing hymns together. Daniel was now locked up, alone, in a paddy wagon. The policeman assigned to guard her spoke to her through a narrow window, apologizing for her undignified treatment

and expressing sorrow that he had to be the one to enforce it. Daniel asked him, “Why are you in this field, if you hate it so much?”

“Just fell into it, I guess. After the military. So I retire in two years, and I’m young,” he said. Then the officer revealed a deeper thirst in his life. “But what I wanted to say to you was something else. What I wanted to say to you was that back there, when you guys were singing ‘Amazing Grace,’ in the capitol building, I liked that. I liked the way your voices sounded when you sang those songs. So I wanted to let you know.”

“Thanks, again,” she said.

“You’ll get out of here soon,” he said.

“You too,” she said.

It’s not unusual for me to be talking to someone about their work and retirement plans and hear them say, “The only reason I’m still working is to keep my medical insurance.”

Jesus speaks to people like that, who find themselves in a place that is unsatisfying, who thirst for a life of meaning. Like the sound of a beautiful hymn in the midst of the world’s cacophony, rises the call of Jesus,

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.”

So first Jesus invites all who are thirsty to find in him *living water*. Then secondly, he declares that,

“Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

In a remarkable statement Jesus proclaims that if we come to him with our thirst, *we ourselves* will become rivers of living water. Being a follower of Christ is not just a journey inward, but a journey outward as well. When we come to Jesus, he gives us the indwelling of the

Holy Spirit. And through the Spirit we participate in the life of God and the water of abundant life flows in and through us.

Our Nicene Creed affirms:

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.

This promise of the Spirit means that the Jesus of history, the carpenter, the teacher, the healer, the washer of disciples' feet; who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried—this same Jesus is *for believers* not just a memory or a story, or an idea, but a living, abiding presence, empowering us to be his people and to be his witnesses—life giving, “rivers of living water.”

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