

“Living Water”

Introduction: Think back for a moment, over the course of this last year, and bring to mind the various invitations you have received. Some, I’m sure, you were thrilled to receive—an invitation to a party or concert, an invitation to coffee or dinner, even possibly an invitation to a promotion at work. Others, I am sure, you were not so thrilled to receive, and they may have elicited one or more of the following responses: “Do I really have to do that?” “Does your family really expect us to travel all the way down there...again?!” “Honey, how can we get out of this one?”

Today we want to consider an invitation from Jesus that I hope all of us will want to hear: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” This is one of the more amazing invitations we could ever receive because it comes with a promise: “Whoever believes in me . . . rivers of living water will flow from within them.” To understand this invitation, let’s first look at the context in which Jesus issues it, and then more specifically at the invitation and the promise itself. Along the way we’ll want to ask: What does it mean to be thirsty? And how does Jesus offer to satisfy us?

I. The Setting of the Feast of Booths

A. Jesus, as we saw last week, has gone down from Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the three great Jewish festivals, the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. It’s a feast that celebrated God’s faithfulness to his people Israel during their wilderness wanderings. To commemorate such, the pilgrims and residents of Jerusalem built temporary structures or booths made of branches in which they would camp out during the week as a reminder of how God had “camped out” with their ancestors, sustaining them during those wilderness days. As a college student who got to spend a fall semester in Jerusalem, I remember sneaking around the neighborhoods during the week of this festival and peeking in the various backyards and porches of the homes to see the booths that had been set up.

B. One of the ceremonies associated with this feast had to do with the drawing of water. Each morning of the week-long feast, the priests, accompanied by the gathered pilgrims, would lead a procession outside of the city to a spring or pool. The pilgrims would carry a branch in their right hand, reminiscent of the desert booths, and a piece of fruit in their left, to celebrate the harvest. When they arrived at the spring, a priest would fill a golden pitcher with water. Then, the procession would return to the city, to the Temple, as the people sang from the psalms. The priest would then march around the altar and pour the water into the ground through a silver funnel.

C. This ceremony was to point both back and forward. It was to remind the worshippers how God had provided water for his people during their desert wandering. As well, it was to point forward to the future blessings of God that would come on his people in the days of the Messiah, blessings often associated in the Bible with images using water. On the last day of the feast, this ceremony would come to a crescendo as the priests, when they returned to the Temple, would march around the altar seven times before pouring the water out. To help the pilgrims remember this event, little golden pitchers were available for purchase as souvenirs to take home.

II. The Invitation from Jesus

A. But Jesus had a different kind of souvenir he wanted the people to take with them. On this last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus, who had gone quietly to the feast, now decided it was time to cry out or speak out in a loud voice, presumably right during the climax of this solemn, water ceremony!

Illustration: I am reminded of the story of a father who was trying to prepare his young son for worship and he asked his little guy, “Why do you think it is important that we be quiet in a church?” To which the boy responded, “Because the people are sleeping?”

Certainly there are times to be quiet during worship, but Jesus didn’t think this was one of them! His invitation was so important that he wanted no one to miss it and so he cried out in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” Jesus wasn’t being rude, nor did he have a problem with anything that was going on during the ceremony. He just wanted the worshippers to know that what the ceremony was pointing to and hoping for—God’s thirst quenching presence with his people—Jesus was now bringing to fulfillment in himself. The invitation was to come, and to drink, a helpful picture of what belief entails. It is an invitation not just to observe Jesus, or to say he exists, or to think nice thoughts about him, but to take him in, to commit to him and appropriate him into our lives. That’s what belief is, as Jesus defines it. It’s not just mental assent (“come”) but entails trusting and following and obeying (“drink”).

B. As we think about this invitation, let’s think about our thirst. We’re pretty clear about what our physical thirst feels like. How about our spiritual or sacred thirst, which Jesus is pointing to here? What’s that all about? How do you know if you are thirsty? It might help if we think back to the last time when Jesus spoke about living water. It was to the Samaritan woman at the well, and her need to come and to drink the living water that Jesus offered. You might recall that this woman had gone through five husbands and was now living with sixth man. She was thirsty and she thought just the right man would quench that thirst. Most of us have not been through five or six spouses, but perhaps we’ve tried five jobs, or five weight loss plans, or five health clubs, or five churches, or five different types of addictive substances, or five new homes . . . and still that seemingly insatiable thirst continues. Still, our search for meaning and purpose and significance goes unanswered.

Illustration: Craig Barnes, a writer and pastor in the Washington D.C. area wrote a book a few years back which he called *Sacred Thirst*, with the poignant subtitle, *Meeting God in the Desert of our Longings*. He cites a writer named Ruth Shalit, who wrote an article for *The New Republic* about the decline of religion but the rise of spirituality, marked, as she observed it, by a sudden fascination with angels. Shalit writes, “Even as Americans absent themselves from the disciplines and encumbrances of traditional religion, angels have returned with a vengeance, but with less manifestation of faith than an objectification of a need” (p. 18).

C. What Shalit describes as the objectification of a need, Barnes identifies as a thirst for God. And the point he is making, and I think he is right on, is that our thirsts and our longings, whatever they may be—for money or relationship or applause or power or pleasure—are not bad in and of themselves, if we can use them to help identify the greater need they all point to, our sacred thirst. Our thirst is God-given. Our longings reveal our dignity—our being created, as we heard C.S. Lewis describe it last week, to run only on the fuel that God provides: Himself. The misled strategies we come up with to satisfy those longings reveal our depravity and the fact that our thirst can only be satisfied by coming to and drinking from God’s very self, whom we meet in Jesus. That’s the point Jesus was making when he called out in a loud voice during that water ceremony, “Come to me and drink. I will satisfy you in a way that nothing else can.”

III. The Promise of the Spirit

A. Now the way this invitation will specifically be fulfilled, Jesus goes on to say, is through the gift of God’s Spirit, God’s empowering, convicting, comforting, and refreshing presence, whom God pours out through his Son. Up to this point in the progressive revelation of

God, the Spirit has made his appearance by empowering particular people at particular times for particular purposes. But after Jesus is glorified, after the cross, the Spirit will be poured out on all who come to Jesus and drink, on all who believe. He will be like living water flowing within us. It might be worth pausing here and wondering why we might sometimes not feel this thirst-quenching presence of the Spirit. We've believed, and we're trusting, but we wonder. The question really is, we have the Spirit, as a gift through faith. Does the Spirit have us?

Illustration: One of the leading researchers on things church and religion, George Barna, came out with the stat a few years ago that over one-third of those who say they believe in God have never experienced his presence. Perhaps Barna's findings in a more recent survey (2013) offer at least one possible reason. This survey had to do with what temptations people admitted to experiencing. What they owned up to was procrastinating (60%), worrying (60%), overeating (55%), and (here's the significant one) spending too much time on various forms of media (44%). When you think about it, our life has become one that is punctuated by various cell phone or computer dings and jingles, all of which cause us to try to live on multiple fronts simultaneously (*God in the Whirlwind*, David Wells, 35-36). Perhaps we don't experience the refreshing presence of the Spirit because we find it hard to make space for him. We need a place to go and a time that is set aside where we are not distracted so that we can pay attention to God and how he might want to refresh us by his Spirit. We have the Spirit; does the Spirit have us?

B. Through it all, what this promise of the Spirit also has us keep in mind is that this living water is not only for our own refreshment, but so that God can use us once we've received his refreshment to extend that refreshment to others. One of the OT visions that beautifully pictures this for us, as it connects with the priest pouring out his pitcher of water at the altar of the Temple at the feast, is from Ezekiel 47. This vision pictures the restored Temple, after the return from exile, being the place from which a river will flow. It begins at the threshold with a trickle, like that from a pitcher. In about 600 yards it becomes ankle deep, then in another 600 knee-deep, then waist-deep, then to deep to cross unless you were swimming. But the vision isn't finished, for then this river floods the Dead Sea with enough healing water to make it fresh, and where it flows everything will live, and fruit trees for healing will grow on both banks of this river which will never fail to bear fruit.

C. What is significant is that the Temple that was rebuilt after the return from Exile never really amounted to much and in fact, the Temple from which this healing, refreshing water who is the Spirit actually flows is Jesus himself. Even more, we read in the NT that the temple of Jesus' body has become the church, and that the Spirit, as Paul puts it to the Corinthians, lives in our midst (1 Cor. 3:16). All of which means that the result of this invitation is not just that we are to be satisfied by God's refreshing presence, but that we are to become God's "golden pitchers" through which his loving presence will overflow to others. Jesus gives us the Spirit so that this healing, living water, can flow through us to others.

I was thinking about that vision from Ezekiel as I went for a bike ride around Great Neck last week. Just before you get to Great Neck you cross a kind of causeway. The day I rode there the tide was out and several boats were just sitting there, stuck in the mud of the ocean floor, unable to go anywhere. When boats are in that state, nothing can move them, not the wind, not a motor, not several strong men or women; it would even be hard to get a trailer out there! When the tide comes in, of course, all of that changes. The boats will rise up and float so that even the hand of a child could now move them. The Holy Spirit is like an incoming tide. He lifts us, dead and stuck as we are in the dysfunctional ways we try to quench the longings of our heart, into new and refreshing life with God. And he enables us to grow in that life, bringing us fruit and gifts that

equip us to “leave our mooring” and head out to others with the good news that Jesus is Lord and that he loves them with a love that surpasses all understanding.

Are you thirsty? Do you have a sacred thirst, a thirst nothing else seems to quench? Jesus invites you to come and drink, to receive God’s refreshment, and to be used by God to be refreshment to others.