

“Living Water”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 20, 2022

7th Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 147:1-11

Rev. John Wahl

John 7:37-41

This week, the news has been filled with intense images of Russian troops gathering at the border of Ukraine and the threat of another war breaking out on the European continent. Leaders from many Western nations have gathered to remind one another of the great toll that conflict would bring. The people of Ukraine have taken to snow-covered streets to pray that they might be spared from an authoritarian incursion, that they would be left to pursue the democratic path of self-governance and peace.

At the same time, we are starting to see images of people taking to the streets in locales like Rio and New Orleans to celebrate Mardi Gras: the festive celebration of parties and parades that will culminate in Fat Tuesday. Though still somewhat muted because of Covid, residents and visitors are coming out to dance and sing, to proclaim abundance ahead of the upcoming season of Lent – the time of preparation for the Resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday.

It is quite a contrast of images.

This morning, our reading is set in a different celebration: the Jewish festival of booths, a week-long commemoration of the abundance of the harvest. At its origin, the people would erect booths, or tents, alongside the fields in autumn so that they need not waste any travel time during the harvest, instead able to gather in their crops from sun-up to sun-down.

In Jesus' day, the Jewish people would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of booths, living in tents that they erected for the week to remind them of the abundance of the harvest and their dependence on God for all good gifts. Each morning, they would gather and stand outside, waving palm and willow branches, like at a parade. On the final and most important day of the festival, the priests would carry water in golden pitchers from the Pool of Siloam, the main water source for the city, to the Temple and pour it out as a reminder of

the fruitfulness of God: the One who provided water from the rock in the desert and brought them out of Egypt and into this fertile land.¹

Jesus, who – in the last chapter – had miraculously fed the five thousand people and then proclaimed himself to be the living bread, now stands among them and says: “All who are thirsty should come to me! All who believe in me should drink!” But many of the people did not yet believe. They knew him as a man from Galilee, the son of a carpenter, who earlier that year, at the festival of the Passover, had entered the Temple, turning over the tables of money changers and driving out the animals that they were selling for sacrifice.

Was he here to disrupt another festival? Had he come to upend the ancient traditions of the Jewish faith, to upstage the priests of Jerusalem? Was he – a Galilean – claiming to be the Messiah, when the scriptures clearly foretold that the Christ would come from Bethlehem of Judea, the city of David? Instead being inspired to faith, the Jewish leaders plotted about how they might arrest and silence Jesus; conflict seemed to follow him.

The Gospel of John presents us with a contrast of images.

What the people could not yet see – because his time had not come, because he had not yet been crucified and risen from the grave – is that in Jesus, God had come to dwell with them; literally, as John says in the first chapter, to pitch his tent among them. The living, life-giving water of abundance that they celebrated at the harvest festival flowed out like a river through Jesus. He was teaching them that this water is needed not only for quenching physical thirst, but also for nourishing our spirits, to fill us up when our own wells run dry.

I have been thinking about different types of thirst. In these challenging times, when so many of us have been isolated from friends and family members, limited in our gatherings for celebrations of birthdays or anniversaries, weddings and funerals, we thirst for relationship. In the midst of such sadness and loss, as we inch towards a death count of a million fellow Americans from COVID, we thirst for comfort. In an atmosphere of political division and acrimony, where school boards have even become places of intense conflict, we thirst for civility. In a world that is warming and sea levels are rising and climate emergencies are worsening, where violent crime and death from drug overdose is increasing, we thirst for some sense of control.

¹ “I Love to Tell the Story” Podcast from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Jesus seems to know that, then and now, we are thirsty. People in the church – as well as those of different faiths or no faith – are confounded by uncertainty and unnerved by change; we long to know what the future might hold. Jesus says: all who are thirsty, come to me. For from him flows the living water, that which can quench any, and all, thirst. And not only that, those who drink of this water will become springs themselves. When the Spirit comes, Jesus says, it will protect us, guide us, and inspire us to quench the thirst of others: physical and spiritual needs, fears and longings, loneliness and division. As Christ has come to be with and for us, so we are called to be with and for one another.

This morning, we ordain and install new leaders into the church offices of deacon and elder. These individuals have been elected by the congregation for this defined term of service. They will soon be asked to answer a number of questions about their particular roles, and the rest of you will be tasked with supporting them in this calling.

This is not an easy time to serve the church, any church. It has been criticized, sometimes rightly. It has had a difficult time sharing the stage with other faiths. Its definitions for membership and inclusion are quickly evolving. Its role and relevance has been questioned. Its voice has become muffled.

But we can hardly remember or imagine a time of greater thirst; when the living water which springs forth in Christ, and through the church and its people, is more needed. And so, on this day, we will proclaim our faith, affirm our support for these designated leaders, and answer Jesus' invitation to come and drink. We will acknowledge the contrast between our abiding hope in God's abundance and the great needs of the world around us. And we will seek the guidance of the Spirit to lead us into what may be unfamiliar paths; new ways of celebrating the festivals and rituals that give us meaning; different directions for the ways we live out our calling to heal the world, to love our neighbor and to see Christ's face in them. Amen.

Let us pray: *Loving God, your Son proclaimed living water to all who are thirsty. We are thirsty, Lord. Quench our thirst with your living water and fill our souls. Amen.*