

“If Anyone Thirsts”

The Twenty-Seventh in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 7:37-52; Isaiah 55:1-9

We are well-familiar with the image of a parched individual struggling for survival in the desert—lips cracked, delirious, with the mirage of a blue oasis on the horizon. For those living in Palestine at the time of Jesus, the lack of water was a real and potential danger. In an arid climate the securing of water was a daily ordeal. There were cisterns and catch basins, springs in certain areas, wells in others, Roman aqueducts in several large cities—but no one had plumbing. If even you could find water, you had to carry it to where you were going to use it—a daily need. Without water—if it didn’t rain, if the spring or well dried up—you would be forced to move a place to where water could be found. Then there was the problem of brackish or contaminated water, which you needed to live, but which would make you sick. In a world such as that of first century Palestine and under the circumstances just described, and given Israel’s own history with water in the desert wilderness, the messianic promise of pure water which is always replenished—a living water—was a powerful metaphor and a prominent expectation of the messianic age.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of John and working our way through the so-called “conflict phase” of Jesus’ messianic mission as recounted in John chapters 7-10. We have spent the last several Sundays looking at the first section of John 7 when Jesus entered Jerusalem during the Feast of Booths. Although he entered the city quietly and without fanfare, Jesus immediately went into the temple and began teaching, drawing a large crowd, and generating great controversy among the Jews over his person and the nature of his messianic mission. Is Jesus a prophet, or the Christ? What about his authority, his insight into the Old Testament, and his miracles?

In our time in John 7, we have seen that the Jews (the “Jews” in John’s Gospel is not a reference to the Jewish people in general, but to the Jewish religious leadership and those allied with them) openly questioned Jesus’ credentials to teach, only to have Jesus declare that his words and authority come directly from YHWH. Jesus tells the Jews that they do not keep the law of Moses, and to prove his point, Jesus exposes the plot to kill him then being hatched by the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus reminds the crowds that a year or so earlier, when he had been in Jerusalem, he had healed a man on the Sabbath who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When the man got up and walked and moved his bedroll, the Jews accused Jesus of being a law-breaker for violating the Sabbath commandment. Jesus points out that the Jews themselves made exceptions for the weightier matters of the law when it came to circumcision (as Jesus had done with the invalid), and despite the outward piety of the members of the Sanhedrin, it was they who were engaged in the grossest form of hypocrisy—plotting to kill their own Messiah for being a law-breaker, when he had kept the law perfectly (since he was the law’s author).

As we saw last time, the increasingly heated exchange between Jesus and the Jews quickly got to the heart of the matter. Who is Jesus? A prophet? Is Jesus truly the Christ (the Messiah)? According to one school of Jewish messianic expectation, popular at the time, Jesus could not be the Messiah. It was thought that the Christ would be a great deliverer (no thought was given to an incarnation) who would remain completely hidden until he revealed himself at a time of great national crisis. The problem with Jesus’ claim to be the Christ (at least from the perspective of those who held this view) is that the Jews knew too much about him. Many knew where Jesus was born (Bethlehem—the right place), they knew his parents (Joseph and Mary), they knew that he was raised in Nazareth, that he now lived in Capernaum,

and that after the death of John the Baptist, his ministry became very popular (especially in Galilee). None of this fit with the “hidden Messiah” view held by many.

But Jesus does speak with a remarkable authority, he does know the Old Testament better than anyone they have ever seen, and what about the miracles? No one could do the things Jesus was doing unless God was with him, and Jesus himself had claimed that YHWH had sent him. When Jesus told the Jews that he knew YHWH, but that they did not (in effect, telling them they were unbelievers), many in crowd became angry and attempted to seize him. This seems to be a spontaneous act, and not part of the Sanhedrin’s larger plot to have Jesus arrested, and then put to death. Because it was not God’s appointed time for Jesus to be arrested (a point made several times throughout this narrative), he managed to escape the crowds. John does not tell us how Jesus did so, but he does tell us that some who heard Jesus teach that day did believe in him—a testimony to the power of Jesus’ words to give life.

Upon hearing that there was a commotion in the temple area, the Pharisees sent the temple police to arrest Jesus. Ironically, while the Pharisees were seeking to put their plan to arrest Jesus into effect, and having avoided the crowd’s attempt to seize him, Jesus was able to make one more important declaration. In verses 33-34, he told the people, *“I will be with you a little longer, and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me. Where I am you cannot come.”* Since we already know the Gospel of John and how things turn out in the end, we know that when Jesus says this, he is referring to his coming betrayal, arrest, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The crowds who do not have the benefit of biblical hindsight, and who had been badly misled by their own teachers, completely misunderstood Jesus’ words, thinking that he was speaking of his own plan to escape arrest at the hands of the authorities and flee the area. We read of the crowd’s reaction in verses 35-36. *“The Jews said to one another, ‘Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks? What does he mean by saying, ‘You will seek me and you will not find me,’ and, ‘Where I am you cannot come?’”* While Jesus was speaking prophetically and preparing his people for his cross, resurrection, and ascension yet to come, instead, the Jews understood Jesus to be looking for a way to escape from the authorities.

As we now pick up where we left off last time (with verse 37), John tells us that what follows takes place a day or two after Jesus withdrew from the temple before the crowd could seize him. Although John says nothing about the location, it is assumed that Jesus has returned to the temple area on day seven of the Feast as the final water ritual was being performed. According to John in verses 37-38, *“on the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”* These words from Jesus are profound and are packed with messianic imagery. The reason Jesus waits until the last day of the feast to say this is surely because of the messianic significance of his words, and because the issue being debated by the people is whether or not Jesus is truly the Christ.

Although Jesus knows that his hour is not yet, he must fulfill all righteousness and begin to prepare God’s people for those events which he knows are to come several months later during the celebration of the Passover. Then he will offer himself as the true Passover lamb. But there are important things to accomplish first. To demonstrate that he is Israel’s Messiah, Jesus chooses the “great day” of the Feast to speak of himself as “living water.” Jesus will go on to clarify that the metaphor of living water refers to the work of the Holy Spirit (Jesus is also beginning to prepare God’s people for Pentecost), and then he will refer to himself as the light of the world (in John 8:12 ff—our text for next time).

As we seek to understand the meaning of Jesus' words, we need to consider several Old Testament texts which figure prominently in the background of Jesus' declaration. The first of these is Isaiah 55 (which we read as part of our Old Testament lesson, and the second is Zechariah 14:16-17, which was part of the temple liturgy for the first day of the feast. The third is Exodus 17:1-7, to which we will turn shortly.

In Isaiah 55:1-9, the prophet foresees the messianic age as a time in which the deepest human needs will be satisfied, because all of the covenant blessings promised by God are gloriously and finally realized. Water is promised to the thirsty (as we have seen, an unlimited supply of clean water is an important blessing which we take for granted). Those who have no money will receive whatever they need. There will be a magnificent feast with the best of foods and all are invited—rich and poor alike. Isaiah recounts this glorious promise as follows. *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has 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 diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”*

The reference to David's authority over the nations ties the fulfillment of this promise to the messianic age when the messianic king, who will be David's descendant, will have dominion over all the world. Those looking for these messianic blessings are urged in verses 6-7 to *“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”* These are the blessings which Jesus will secure through his death, resurrection, and ascension (the reason why Jesus must go away). All of those who seek the Lord (i.e., who trust in Jesus) will receive these blessings in the present age, and these blessings will be given in their fulness when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and usher in the new creation.

The celebration of the Feast of Booths is specifically mentioned in the prophecy of Zechariah, where attendance at the Feast is seen as evidence of Israel's future restoration. This too will finally be consummated when Jesus returns at the end of the age. In Zechariah 14:16-19, we read, *“then everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain; there shall be the plague with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths.”* The presence of rain (water) will be a sign of God's blessing upon those Gentile nations who will serve YHWH, and this prophetic imagery is in view (as an echo) when Jesus speaks of himself as the source of living water. He is that king who will be worshiped by the nations.

As for the water-ritual of the great day, on each of the seven days of the Feast, a grand processional, led by the high priest, carried water drawn from the Pools of Siloam into the temple using a large golden vessel. When the processional entered the temple courtyard (going through the so-called “water gate”) a trumpet sounded. The priests carried the water around the temple, the temple choir sang the *Hillel* Psalms (Psalm 113-118) while the pilgrims watched. When the choir came to the final Psalm (118), all the men present raised a palm and myrtle twig (tied together) with their right hand and a piece of harvest

fruit in the other (to give thanks for the harvest). The water was then poured out as an offering to the Lord, of course, recalling to mind YHWH's gracious provision of water in the desert for the people of Israel. All of this was thought to be a pointer to the messianic age, when, the Jews believed, water from a rock would flow over the whole earth.¹

Since the water-pouring ritual and the ceremony of the lights conclude on the seventh day of the feast (the "great day"), no doubt, there was a sense of expectation among the people when Jesus stood up and then cried out, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'*" His words echo both Isaiah 55 and Zechariah 14. In saying this, Jesus is declaring that the central event of the Feast points ahead to him. Jesus is the one who gives the water promised by Isaiah. Jesus is the one to whom the nations of the earth will pay homage. Jesus is the one in whom the Israelites must believe because he is the one who fulfills all of the messianic promises of Scripture. Recall that Jesus has already told the Samaritan woman in John 4:14 that "*whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*" Jesus is making much the same point here. He will give a water which truly satisfies the needs of his people.

Although there is much debate about the meaning of the phrase "out of his heart"—whether it refers to the believer's heart (the water bubbles up from within) or to Jesus' heart (the water flows out from him), a good case can be made that the "he" is Jesus.² But however, we understand this particular point, it is clear from verse 39 that the living water is a metaphor which points to the Holy Spirit. "*Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*" The Scriptures are replete with redemptive-historical connections between water (as a symbol) and the Holy Spirit. A couple of examples will suffice. In Nehemiah 9:15-20, Nehemiah connects the provision of manna and water in the wilderness with instruction by the Spirit of the Lord. In Isaiah 44:3 we read, "*for I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.*" Jesus himself makes a connection between water and the Spirit, as in John 3:5 when Jesus told Nicodemus, "*unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*"

When Jesus stands up and cries out, he is proclaiming to everyone watching the ceremony that he is the Christ and that all of Israel's prophets and ceremonies foretold of him—his identity has been the topic of debate among the Jews for the last several days. Because Jesus has come, the messianic age has come. Because he is the Christ, streams of living water will flow from him. The water he offers the people of God, is that pure messianic water of which Isaiah and Zechariah has been speaking. But his words also direct us back to the first seven verses of Exodus 17 and the water in the rock:

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So Moses

¹ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 321-322.

² Contra Carson, The Gospel According to John, 323.

cried to the Lord, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And the Lord said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

The Lord was indeed among them, and as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4 regarding the Israelites, *“and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.”* So, when Jesus stands up at the Feast and declares himself to be the source of the promised living water, he is declaring that he is the Lord who was in the midst of Israel in the wilderness—the point made by Paul. Jesus is proclaiming himself to be the rock from which the life giving waters came, and he now says that he is the one who will take away all spiritual thirst. He is pointing his people ahead to Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We must not miss the fact that Jesus is also declaring that he is that one who will lead the people of God in a New Exodus, because he is the one who gives the Holy Spirit—symbolized by the living water—and who by indwelling us, will meet our deepest spiritual needs and satisfy our spiritual thirst. Yet those who heard Jesus make this declaration in the temple did not think of Pentecost (which had not yet come), and were instead thinking of the fact that Jesus was once again claiming to be the Christ—a point reinforced in the following verses by the response of those who heard him. When Jesus stood up in the temple and declared himself to be the living water, Jesus is not only claiming to be Israel’s Messiah, he is also telling the Jewish leaders that Israel’s entire history was centered in his person and work, and that true Israel’s future will involve a New Exodus which he will lead.

Looking back on this saying (after Pentecost) in verse 39 John tells us the meaning of Jesus’ declaration about the living water. *“Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”* On the Day of Pentecost, Jesus is the one who will give the gift of the promised Holy Spirit to all those who presently believe, as well as to those yet to believe in Jesus. When Jesus is glorified after his resurrection and taken back into heaven in his ascension, only then the Spirit will come in his fullness. This means that all those indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will receive God’s promise of living water which gives eternal life and which satisfies all spiritual thirst. It also means that Jesus’ declaration that he is the living water is a metaphor for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself will explain this in much more detail in the Upper Room discourse beginning chapter 12.

From John’s account it is clear that the crowds sensed the great significance of what Jesus had said even if they did not fully understand the implications. More heated debate about Jesus’ identity began immediately. *“When they heard these words, some of the people said, ‘This really is the Prophet.’” Others said, ‘This is the Christ.’”* Who else but the Messiah could speak like this man? Many in Jerusalem that day came to the same conclusion that people in the Galilee had come. Maybe Jesus was that prophet predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. Others—especially in light of Jesus’ response to all the debate which had taken place during the feast—came to the conclusion that Jesus is indeed the Christ (Messiah). Everything he did and said seemed to point this direction, despite what the Pharisees were teaching about a hidden Messiah not yet revealed.

Others were not convinced that Jesus had the right messianic qualifications. *“But some said, ‘Is the*

Christ to come from Galilee?” as though they were not sure (or did not know) about Jesus’ ties to Bethlehem in Galilee. Others responded by appealing to the well-known messianic prophecies of the Old Testament which spoke of the Messiah’s origins and which had been obscured by the “hidden Messiah” interpretation. *“Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?”* Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and he was an offspring of David. He certainly had the right credentials. The fact that Jesus was considered a Galilean (Galileans were looked down upon by those in Judea) obscured what should have been obvious—that Jesus has all of the biblical qualifications to be the one.

The consequence of this difference of opinion becomes clear in verse 43. *“So there was a division among the people over him.”* When Jesus speaks, he opens up the ground under people’s feet (so to speak) and forces them to commit one way or the other. Those listening to Jesus in the temple were forced to decide—is he the Messiah, or is he not. This was no polite intermural debate as becomes clear from what follows. As we read in verse 44, *“some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.”* The Jews wanted Jesus placed under arrest, but it was not yet his hour, and so John reports that no one actually stepped forward who was willing to do the deed.

An arrest warrant had already been drafted, but it was clear to those who were attempting to serve the warrant that it was not going to happen. *“The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, ‘Why did you not bring him?’”* Trying to arrest Jesus, but failing, the officers (the temple police) went back to the Sanhedrin who had sent them. The Sanhedrin could not understand why the warrant had not been served. *“The officers answered, ‘No one ever spoke like this man!’”* Jesus avoided arrest because of the power of his words. It was evident to all that he possessed a divine authority and may even be the prophet. Jesus was not someone you could just “arrest.”

That answer was not what the Pharisees (the more militant and law and order types on the Sanhedrin) wanted to hear. They were not satisfied. *“The Pharisees answered [the officers], ‘Have you also been deceived?’”* The Sanhedrin’s greatest fear is that people would begin following Jesus and then reject their authority. The extent of their fear becomes clear in verse 48. *“Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him?”* Since no one among their own number at this point had become a follower of Jesus, the Sanhedrin turns their collective wrath upon those in the crowd who had believed in him, even mocking them. *“But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.”*

Yet, one person does speak in Jesus’ defense—our old friend Nicodemus, who approached Jesus at night (as recounted in John 3). *“Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them [i.e., a Pharisee], said to them, ‘Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?’”* Nicodemus reminds his fellow Pharisees that Jesus is entitled to due process, regardless of what he is teaching. His respect for Jesus is implied, yet John never gives us an indication that Nicodemus actually became a believer.

With so much anger and fear in the air, Nicodemus’ appeal to calm and reason is dismissed with cold contempt. We read in verse 52, *“They replied, ‘Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.”* How could Nicodemus speak on behalf of a man who posed such a great threat to the Sanhedrin—especially when the man is a Galilean? How can the Messiah come from Galilee? The Sanhedrin’s lack of faith, their self-righteousness, and their sinful prejudices are now out in the open. When a respected member of the Sanhedrin asks for due process, he is summarily dismissed. Nicodemus is told to go and search the Scriptures to see where it was written that the Messiah would be a Galilean.

The great irony is that those in Israel who claim to be the defenders of the faith, don't know their own Bibles. The crowds they just mocked as accursed at least knew that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem—the Pharisees did not, and sent Nicodemus off to figure out the meaning all of this messianic talk linking the Messiah to Bethlehem and the lineage of David.

What then, do we take with us from this passage? On the last day of the feast, Jesus publically declares that he has been at the center of Israel's history all along. He is the New Moses and the final covenant mediator. He is the Christ will now lead his people (those who trust in him) in a New Exodus through the wilderness of this present evil age to the heavenly city, where we will enter our Sabbath rest. Jesus is the rock that provided God's people with water in the wilderness. He is the one of whom Isaiah is speaking when YHWH promises to give his people pure and abundant water—a powerful metaphor reminding us that Jesus will meet all of our deepest spiritual needs.

And his invitation, "*If anyone thirsts,*" reminds us that Jesus will freely give us living water which will take away that thirst. He makes these promises in his word. He gives us himself in the sacraments. And, he has given us the blessed Holy Spirit.