

I

This past summer, on a warm, humid Saturday afternoon I was enjoying a round of golf, when, after three or four holes, my playing partner said to me, “I don’t feel very good.” I asked what was wrong, and he said he felt a little lightheaded. He confessed that he had skipped lunch, and as luck would have it, at that very moment, the drink cart happened to approach. I convinced him to eat a protein bar and drink a sports drink, which he did, and said he felt a little better.

However, a few holes later, he bent over to put his tee in the ground, and when he stood up again, he looked like a boxer who was one punch away from going down for the count. I helped him into the cart, and we raced back to the clubhouse, I put him in my car, and drove him straight to the hospital.

When we arrived at the emergency room, the doctors and nurses quickly diagnosed the problem – he was experiencing severe dehydration. After a few bags of fluids administered by IV and an overnight stay for observation, he was released and proclaimed good to go and admonished to do a better job of hydrating while enjoying the outdoors in the Georgia summer.

II

Water is a basic need for all living things with whom we share this planet. We know that the human body can survive for a few minutes without oxygen, and for a few hours without

shelter, but we won’t live more than a few days without water. And conversations about water and life are at the heart of our reading this morning from the Gospel of John.

III

This winter, we’ve been reading and preaching our way through the Gospel of John, and one of the things we’ve noticed is that many of the stories about Jesus found in John’s gospel are set in relation to a Jewish festival or holy day. If you were with us last week, you might remember that last week’s reading took place near the holiday of Passover, and Jesus had an extended conversation with his disciples about food, proclaiming to them, “I am the bread of life.”

This week’s story takes place around the festival of booths, a fall holy day in which faithful Jews came from points near and far to pray for a successful fall harvest and to pray for winter rains to pave the way for spring crops. Near the end of the week-long festival, the high priest would take a golden pitcher, fill it with water from a nearby freshwater pool, and then proceed to walk around the Temple pouring water on the ground.

And so our reading today is set in the Temple in Jerusalem during this fall holiday in which people have come from near and far to pray for a successful fall harvest and winter rains to nourish the earth for spring planting.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem for the festival, and once again, he's been preaching and teaching, and many faithful Jews are coming to believe in him. But he's also creating enemies, especially among the Pharisees and the chief priests, who see this Galilean as such a threat to their hold on privilege and power that they've given orders to the temple police to have him arrested.

So with that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God from John 7:37-52.

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, "This is really the prophet." Others said, "This is the Messiah." But some asked, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" So there was a division in the crowd because of him. Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?"

The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived too, have you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed." Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?" They replied, "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

IV

I have a hunch, my friend, that you are thirsty this morning- not necessarily in your throat, but deep down in your bones, deep down in your guts.

I have a hunch that you're thirsty because you've had to run so hard in these last few years just to keep up. For nearly two years, every interaction you've had with another human being has been filtered through the lens of the pandemic, whether you wanted it to be or not. You've been run ragged from one opinion to another about what's needful and what's not. There's been so much grief, so much loss, so much heaviness, that as we'd say in Texas, you're plum wore out.

And you do not lack for options with which to quench that thirst. Just think about all the ads from last weekend's Super Bowl. In your pocket and purse right now there is a device that, with just a few clicks, can bring you your favorite kind of soda, or beer, or something stronger. If you're thirsty for wealth, you can trade stocks or bonds or, as the Super Bowl ads would have you do, cryptocurrency. If you're thirsty to escape, you can dial up a brand-new pickup truck, all while you're sitting right here in these pews. If you're thirsty to argue with strangers, you can open your favorite social media app and fire away. You do not lack for options with which to address the thirst in your bones.

But eventually, the beer wears off and runs out. Eventually, the truck gets old and breaks down. Money can buy stocks and bonds and non-fungible tokens, but it can't completely quench the thirst that's deep within you.

My friend, Jesus is calling you this morning. He's saying come to me and drink deeply of living water, not because you have it all figured out, because you don't. Not because of what you've said or not said, or done or not done, but come and drink deeply because of who he is.

My friend, lots of people say lots of things about Jesus. Some say he's a made-up legend, second cousin to King Arthur and Sir Lancelot. Some say he's an interesting historical figure or a great moral philosopher or even one of the

prophets. Lots of people say lots of things about Jesus, both then and now.

But my friend, this I testify to you – he is the Messiah – the long-promised, long-awaited one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny are somehow tied together. He is the one who knows you better than even you know yourself – who loves you far beyond all reason, who bids that you would come and drink deeply of his living water this day.

V

Living water.

Living water flows. It moves, from one place to another. Out of the believers' heart shall flow rivers of living water.

The water that Jesus gives us is meant to sustain us, but not to stay with us. It's meant to flow in and through us and then out into a dry, thirsty world.

There are two major inland bodies of water in Israel – the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, and both are connected to one another by the Jordan River. The source of the Jordan River is high in the mountains of northern Israel. The water cascades down and then enters the Sea of Galilee, which isn't a sea at all, but rather a large freshwater lake, about 13 miles long and eight miles wide.

To this day, the water from Sea of Galilee supports all kinds of life, plants, animals, and humans. Not for nothing,

much of Jesus' earthly ministry was spent on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

The water exits the Sea of Galilee and flows to the south, going down, down, down, where it enters the Dead Sea. At about 1,400 feet below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on the surface of the earth. No water flows out of the Dead Sea, and it's so full of salt and other chemicals that hardly any living things are found in or near it, except for tourists.

One body of water has water that flows into it and out of it, and it supports all kinds of life. One body of water only receives, but never gives, and it's called the Dead Sea.

Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water. That's one way to describe the church – those who gather here each week do drink deeply, to satisfy our deep thirst for good news, to let the living water flow over us.

But the living water is not ours to keep. It's not meant to stay here. It's meant to flow in and through us, and then out of our hearts to a dry, dusty, thirsty world.

And that is hard work. It is hard to be the church in these days. It is hard to shine the light of Jesus into the darkness. It is hard to love our enemies and pray for those who would speak ill of us. It is hard to work for peace when violence seems so much easier and more satisfying. It is hard to advocate for fairness and temperance when everyone else wants to rush straight to judgment

and condemnation. It is hard to be a follower of Jesus.

So know that we will get thirsty again. Know that we will be parched and dry and in need of a bath.

And so Jesus will call to us. He will bid that we gather again. And he will say, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink."

Thanks be to God. Amen.