

Living Water – Feb. 20

One of the things that makes John hard to preach is all the symbolism. Symbols work on us in a place deeper than our logical everyday brains. But sermons pretty often hang out in that logical part of the brain – or at least mine do.

Plus, symbolism takes time to work on us. In a fast-paced world where our brains are pretty quick to move on to the next thing, symbols might have a hard time taking hold. Symbols operate best at the slower contemplative pace.

This passage has so much symbolism it's hard to even find a place to start. So we'll start with a place where the logical brain does work and then try to move into the symbolism and just let it work on you.

I do want to make one little side trip. John's gospel repeatedly talks so much about life and living and eternal life...abundant life. I've said this a lot of times in various ways...but right now I want you to find that place in your brain that thinks, or has heard, that religion is primarily about going to heaven when we die.

Maybe you don't have this part of your brain – if not you can just sit for a minute. But if you do, I want you to tunnel into your mind.

Find that little piece of grey matter that says the main purpose of believing in Jesus is to go to heaven when we die. When you find it, pluck it out and set it aside.

Dallas Willard, a philosopher and Christian writer put it like this – the gospel is less about how to get into the kingdom of heaven after you die, and more about how to live in the kingdom of heaven before you die.

Knowing that there is something beyond this life is *a* part of faith. And when we or someone we love nears death we absolutely need to hear that in Jesus, death does not get the last word. But in our everyday lives, it too often seems to get in the way of grasping the depth life Jesus gives us now.

So, with your brain free of that, let's look at today's text. We'll start with the sort of logical part and work our way in to the symbols.

First, let's look at this festival. The festival is the festival of Booths, or Sukkot. It's one of three great festivals that are pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem.

The festival in the fall. Harvest is done and it's during the dry season. Water plays a key role in the festival. It's a time of remembering how God provided for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness.

They built little booths or three-side shelters to remind them of that time and how God provided. Modern day Jews still build these and eat their meals and even sleep in these little shelters during Sukkot.

Water plays a huge role in the festival. There are water ceremonies and prayers to God for rain so that the next growing season would be fruitful.

On the last day of the festival, the priests go to the pool of Siloam and fill up water buckets. In a joyful procession to the Temple, the water is poured on the altar and flows off as a living stream. Wine is also poured onto the altar, so this stream of wine and water flows from the altar.

The Jewish people listening to Jesus would have remembered all sorts of things. They would remember how God provided water from the rocky desert in the wilderness. They would remember things the prophet Isaiah said: With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

And "Ho! Come to me everyone who thirsts! "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." This water ceremony points back into Israel's history. But it also points forward.

Maybe there's a bit of symbolism that has already occurred to you. We know that wine can be a symbol of blood. So this image of water and wine flowing from the altar might evoke the image of Jesus on the cross.

As Jesus hung on the cross, gasping, in the last dying stage, his side was pierced with a spear. Water and blood flowed from his side. Today's scene points symbolically to that image – an image of Jesus' glorification, which in John's gospel happens on the cross.

It is from the side of Jesus that that life-giving river will flow.

Life is such an important theme in John's gospel – Jesus came that we would have life and have it abundantly.

Abundant, not in the sense of length, but depth. The gospel is about being truly alive...tapping into that deep well of living water.

What does it mean to be truly alive? And how does this passage help us?

Confirmation students – pay particular attention to this next part. It's the key to the how does this connect to my life question on your notes. And maybe listen to the whole next part before you write.

Ask – Let's talk about what it means to be truly alive. Actually, it might be easier to think about what it's like to not be truly alive. So, what are some situations or feelings that you associate with not alive?

(Answers)

Example – fear

Now, imagine that flow of living water...that spirit...flowing into and over those places of not alive. Imagine your own parched dry places being brought to life by the water of the spirit. Living water from Jesus is water that brings us back to life.

...examples from responses. Fear → swimming very choppy branched oak.

Rwanda night – Rwanda in the 90's to the vibrancy and sheer aliveness of last night

Other -

That flow of living water from Jesus heals and refreshes us...it brings us back to life. But then that flow doesn't just stop with us. You've heard of the Dead Sea in the Middle East. The Dead Sea has a concentration of salt and minerals that makes life impossible in its waters.

The reason the Dead Sea is dead is because it has no outflow path. The only way the water can leave the lake is by evaporation. That leaves ever increasing concentrations of minerals and salts. Nothing can live in it.

When we have no outflow tract, we too can become like the Dead Sea.

This living water flows from Jesus to and through us. It courses through our veins, refreshing and renewing our own dead spots.

But part of being truly alive is letting that water flow out. The living water – the Holy Spirit – flows through us and into the parched places of the rest of world...places in the earth where human action has caused damage to creation.

It flows into the parched lives of people who are lonely and don't know what it is to be truly loved.

It flows into the parched places where people are too poor to eat well, let alone be fully alive.

It flows into the parched places where actions and attitudes are guided by hatred and prejudice.

It flows into parched places where bullies snatch away the aliveness of the child on the playground who is somehow different from others.

It flows into parched places where young people feel so unaccepted for who they are that suicide seems to be the only way out.

Into all our own parched places, and the parched places of the world, Jesus speaks, let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink...drink the water of love...the water of aliveness...drink from the well that will never run dry.