

Tongues of Fire and Water from the Heart

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Pentecost Dove" by Todd R. Pick

Prayer for Illumination

Lord of heaven and earth,
pour out on us the abundant gifts of your Holy Spirit.
May the work begun by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost
continue in us as we hear your Word and do your will.
Amen.

Scripture: John 7:37-39 (NRSV)

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.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Tongues of Fire and Water from the Heart

Water. Water is kind of mystical and unpredictable. Most liquids contract when they're chilled but water surprisingly expands—a lot when it reaches freezing point. You'd think ice would sink, but surprisingly ice floats on water rather than sinking down. Water's tasteless ... but we love the taste of it. We'll travel long distances and shell out quite a bit of money just to see water in the sunshine.

So much of life is made of water:

- Watermelon is 92% water.
- Dogs are 80% water, cats are 67% water.
- You and I are around 60% water.

We know the importance of water living in the desert—water is life.

- Water regulates our body temperature.
- Water helps us digest food.
- Water flushes out our system.
- Water is organic “WD-40” for our joints.
- Water helps transport oxygen throughout the body.
- Water grows our 10,000 trillion cells in our body.

Like plants or grass, we don't do well without water. In fact, we literally shrink and fall apart within days.

- Water brings change.
- Water is powerful—it will carve canyons and plow mountains.

Whenever a major change takes place, it's called a watershed moment. Our passage is a watershed moment in Jesus' ministry. In our gospel reading this Pentecost Sunday, Jesus reveals to us that he is water to our souls. He's the personification of water to all life. Whether it be living waters, baptismal waters, or the waters Jesus would use for foot-washing—his living waters cleanse and refresh us body and soul.

With Jesus and the Spirit, something supernatural is going on, a holy hydration to help us face life's challenges and heartaches with grace and courage. The living waters of the Spirit quench our thirst—emotional thirst, spiritual thirst, and our relational thirst for fellowship, friendship, and corporate worship.

Many of us through the trials of the coronavirus are in touch with our humanity and fragility: depression, anxiety, fear, and loneliness are signs that we're emotionally thirsty from all this disruption. Jesus says to us: Come and drink.

- Come to me—all who are thirsty and hungry.
- Come to me—all you who are weary and heavy-laden.
- Come to me—all you who feel the knee of injustice choking your neck.
- Come to me, follow me.

Jesus knew the power of water. Jesus—the one who gives living water— would often go to the water himself during his ministry. Jesus would also go to the mountains to pray when he was having to make a decision. You felt closer to the sky—closer to God on the mountaintop. Mountains are places of prayer for vision and revelation. Other times, Jesus would go to the desert to pray to find himself. In the desert you face your giants and wrestle with inner-demons. In the desert you learn spiritual minimalism—a pruning down to your roots. We're in the desert now—literally and figuratively—and we're thirsty.

Jesus would go to the garden to pray when he was undergoing trial. The garden was a place to surround yourself with life and creation. But Jesus would go to the waters to pray for renewal and restoration—particularly when he was facing setbacks. Jesus spent time along the shore of the Sea of Galilee—13 miles long and 8 miles wide. It was these waters that inspired Jesus to say to his fisherman friends: Follow me and I'll make you fish for people.

Jesus was going through a hard time before he spoke these words In our passage, "Come to me, all you who are thirsty." Jesus' own brothers were doubting him and his calling. In our passage, we find ancient Jerusalem in the midst of one of their Festivals—the Festival of Tents. Plain and simple—you can't understand what Jesus was really saying without understanding this festival. The Festival of Tents was the most popular of all the festivals—and it's practiced to this day. For eight days the Jewish people stay in makeshift tents outside their homes to help them remember and re-experience their wilderness wanderings in the time of Moses. God commanded the people to be joyful during this festival—thus another name for this festival is "Season of Our Joy." They were all happy campers at the Festival of Tents.

Here's where the living water theme comes in. Throughout the festival the people prayed for rain. These heavenly showers were symbolic of God raining down his Spirit upon his people that the prophet Joel mentions. Each evening of the festival there was a Celebration of Water Pouring. There would be a procession to the Pool of Siloam, which means in Hebrew "gently flowing waters." The Talmud states: Those who have not seen the rejoicing at the place of water-drawing have never really seen rejoicing in this life.

Sages would juggle flaming torches and perform summersaults. It was said during this festival Jerusalem glistened like a diamond and her light could be seen from afar.

A priest using a golden pitcher would draw water from the Pool of Siloam—the waters from this pool at that time were called "living waters." As the living waters were poured out, a choir would sing the refrain from Isaiah,

"... with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation."

From there, the procession went through the Water Gate. (...and not to worry, this isn't where the "Watergate" scandal originated). As the people processed back to Jerusalem from the pool, they waved willow branches—which made whooshing sounds. The "woosh" reminded them of the Wind of God—the Holy Spirit. A flute player always led the procession—he was called "The Pierced One" which referred to the long-awaited Messiah. The music of the flute from The Pierced One would be a summons for the wind (symbolized by the willow branches) and the water to be brought forward.

From ancient Jewish sources we learn that during this feast there was a place in the temple precincts known as the "Place of Drawing." The priests called it the place of drawing because it was from there that "they drew from the Holy Spirit."

And so, on the LAST and GREATEST day of the festival, the altar in the temple would be circled around seven times with the wind and the water and the fires blazing that lit up the temple sacrifices. Then all the people would join in and sing from Isaiah:

"With joy we will draw water out of the well of salvation."

This was a liturgical re-enactment of Exodus 17—where through Moses, water came from the rock miraculously when the Israelites ran out of water in the desert.

The symbols of water and fire of this festival are described in the book of Zechariah:

It will be a unique day—a day known only to the LORD... "On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of them" east to the Dead Sea and half of them west to the Mediterranean Sea.

The divine timetable was set. Now was the time for Jesus to act and cry out:

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me" and drink. "Whoever believes in me" as Scripture has said, "rivers of living water" will flow from within them.

The people's prayers for water and rain in this festival were answered in a surprising way through a rabbi named Jesus from the small town of Nazareth.

He is The Pierced One—who announces that God's Spirit will be showered upon his people—through him. Just as Moses gave literal water to Israel in the desert, so Jesus, the New Moses, gives Living Water to the thirsty. The life-giving waters will flow not from the temple of Jerusalem, but the temple of Jesus' body.

John alludes to this later in his gospel, where at the crucifixion water pours out of Jesus' side. So too would living water flow from Jesus to others as a source of life for all eternity. But the living waters of the Spirit that Jesus provides will be given later—after Jesus dies, is raised from the dead, and returns to the Father. Another Comforter will be sent then—the Holy Spirit. And he was given at Pentecost.

Today is Pentecost. Through the Spirit we also receive refreshment and life: fellowship, worship, prayer, and spiritual direction. Closeness and connection with God and others—sometimes in body, sometimes in spirit. In the Spirit's power we continue Christ's ministry of feeding the hungry—giving to food banks, making sandwiches for Casa Maria, and addressing the causes of poverty, hunger, and thirst.

We too pray for divine rain—for the Spirit to wash away the sickness of plague from our planet. We pray for the Spirit to be showered upon all people. Washing us clean. Renewing and reviving us forever and ever. Sustaining us to carry on in challenging times. The Spirit is God's presence on earth. Guiding us. Giving us life. The Spirit gives us wisdom on what to do.

This heavenly water will never be exhausted, polluted, or evaporated. The Spirit of Christ is a never-failing, self-replenishing stream of life. Even when we're dry, the living waters of love and courage, of mercy and sacrifice, of prayer and praise, flow from the heart of Jesus and from those who follow Jesus.

The Spirit isn't like the dry riverbed of the Santa Cruz River that goes through Tucson. The Spirit is different. The Spirit never runs dry. The Spirit that Christ gives is a spiritual source for us that will always be available to protect us from spiritual dehydration. All we have to do is be willing to believe and willing to be surprised by God. To trust. And not only taste and see, but also drink and see that Christ's Living Waters will indeed satisfy our spiritual thirst and dry throats, now and forever more.

Amen.

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