

Re-membered by the Light
John 7:37-52

“Let anyone who is thirsty, come to me!”

We’ve heard this message of living water from Jesus in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. But here, in chapter 7, it sounds different. At the well, Jesus and the woman had an intimate conversation about what this water was and what it wasn’t. Here, there’s no conversation; rather, Jesus is announcing it, shouting it into the crowd.

It’s a well-targeted message for this crowd. As Sam mentioned, people have gathered for the Festival of Booths, or Tents. They’re remembering their people’s 40 long years in the wilderness, a time of being thirsty as they moved from one water source to the next. But unlike the woman at the well, who is open and receptive, this crowd isn’t quite so interested. Some people love his message and others hate it. There’s no running back to the village to share the good news of living water with neighbors and friends. Here is a mixture of acceptance and rejection. Some are amazed by his words and others have only harsh condemnation.

In fact, the whole of chapter 7 is filled with this tension. What are we meant to “come and see”? In this story, John isn’t telling us much of anything that Jesus said or of his encounters with people. Most of the storytelling in these verses is about the tension, the argument, the division between those who are for Jesus and those who are against him, between those who choose to trust him and those who find him untrustworthy.

So what is there to “come and see”? John is not a careless storyteller. He’s gone to great lengths to give us a sense of the division and hate and rejection that surrounded Jesus. Yes, he’s giving us his interpretation of historical details...but what does that have to do with us today?

One thing for us to see is the nature of being human. If we take a step back, John could be describing the divisions and tensions in our time, around covid, for example. There are those embracing the vaccine and others want nothing to do with it. Or, consider the response to the country's 45th president: some welcomed him with open arms and others utterly rejected him. The tensions John describes could also be the Mennonite Church. We have a long history of this kind of arguing about how to interpret and understand the Bible and what to believe. Can women be pastors and preachers? Can those who identify as LGBTQ be part of the church? Every generation has added another issue to the list of things we argue and disagree about. And leave the conference and denomination over. We're still arguing...about Jesus...and about so many other things.

What happens if we bring our human nature to this story? Bring our impulse to be in competition and rivalry with each other? What might we see if we listen through the lens of our susceptibility to being in conflict? This isn't unique to us in our time and place—from Cain and Abel and every generation after, the Bible is filled with stories of God's people in conflict. What does Jesus' living water offer our impulse to argue...to be divided...and dismembered...from each other?

One thing to remember is that when the Samaritan woman returned to her village and shared living water with her neighbors, they invited Jesus to stay with them. A Jew being hosted by a village of Samaritans! There, we watched living water wash away the centuries-old arguments and division between enemies.

Into the crowd gathered for the Festival of Tents, Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty, come to me, and let the one who *trusts* me drink." But it can't be that easy, can it? or that simple? God's people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and they sure got thirsty. But Jesus...the Word of God-made-flesh...is a living...breathing metaphor. He's talking about a

metaphorical thirst. Living water as metaphor. His invitation is to those who have a deep spiritual thirst, a thirst that can only be quenched by spiritual water.

But. He's also talking about our physical bodies and lives. The cost of ongoing spiritual thirst has consequences in our bodies and in our relationships and how we live our lives. When biblical writers write about the 40 years in the wilderness, it's common to describe the constant "murmuring" of the people. There was lots of complaining, a symptom of deep discontent and dissatisfaction. Here, at the Festival of Tents, we can imagine Jesus looking around and seeing the unhappiness, the frustration, the deep thirst of the crowd. They may not be in the wilderness, but the oppression of living under occupation is heavy and they're thirsty for liberation. Just as we're thirsty and murmuring from our years in the wilderness of covid. Jesus sees the human beings in the crowd. He sees us. And he's compelled to offer something else, something other than the toxic water of unhappiness and discord and division that they and we are drinking....

Jesus' invitation to drink is anything but straightforward...or simple...or easy. "Let the one who *trusts* me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of [his] *womb* shall flow rivers of living water.'" What on earth does that mean?!

To begin to answer that, we need a look at what the text says. If the reading you heard today sounded different to your ears, it's because I've made some changes. The NRSV reads: 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" The problem with that translation is that isn't what the Greek says. The word "believers" isn't in that sentence. Neither is "heart." The word is "womb" or "belly." It makes a difference! (And I have some opinions about the translators' choices!)

"Out of [his] *womb* shall flow rivers of living water." Jesus isn't offering a cup of water, physical or spiritual, to drink. Rather, the living water is a river that flows from his womb. In

our ears, Jesus' words just got even more complicated. How can Jesus, the son of God, the son of humanity, have a womb? In the Gospel of John, it is absolutely possible! This Gospel has been confusing our well-defined sense of opposites and binaries. In John's Gospel the spiritual becomes physical and the physical, spiritual. The literal turns into a metaphor and the metaphor becomes literal. And now, Jesus is taking on the female, the feminine, claiming a spiritual womb that will flow with life-giving water.

Stay with me. The way forward is winding!

Water flowing out of wombs is a birthing image. At the well, Jesus and the woman talked about life-giving water that you drink. Here, he's talking about life-giving water that flows out of a womb. Birthing waters. This thirst that Jesus is talking about isn't a simple, "I'm thirsty. Can I have a glass of water?" It's something else. Something creative...the beginning.

In this Gospel that is re-storying creation, how do rivers of living water flowing from wombs fit into the story? Biologically, the water in a womb is, quite literally, life-creating and life-giving. Womb waters holds the new life in its darkness, providing all the nourishment needed for the gestation of new life. And we know that diet and habits of the mother-to-be affect the development of the life that's forming. If her diet and habits are filled with toxins, this too will form...or de-form...the life in her womb.

This life-giving water that will flow from Jesus' womb...and our wombs...isn't a simple or easy water that Jesus is offering. This water will take time. This water requires *trusting* Jesus. It's something we *choose*. And once we've chosen it, that's when the trusting begins. We trust that the living-giving waters of the Spirit of the Living God, are the same waters that flowed from Jesus. We trust the Spirit of God, the same Spirit that breathed in Jesus. Our trust grows into our participation—our eating and drinking, our habits and life-styles, our words and emotions, our choices and actions—all of these grow out of our trust. But we

don't control God's living water, this womb water. It is part of us but also beyond us. It is the Word of God being spoken into the world...*through us*. It is God's Word being made flesh...*in us*. It is the Spirit of God, breathing into our darkness, into our emptiness, into our deep, deep thirst, and from that breath, new life. Rivers of living water.

Jesus is aware of all of these things. And he is waiting to give birth. He is waiting for the time to ripen when the birthing waters will flow out of his body. Earlier in the chapter we hear him say that "his time isn't here yet." He says that earlier in the Gospel, as well. His "due date" isn't here yet. But he knows that soon enough he'll go into labor and deliver new life.

And indeed, when he's on the cross, the soldiers pierce him. And blood and water flow from his womb. Rivers of life-giving water for those who are thirsty.

Friends, it is *we* who are being invited to find life in these waters. We are being invited to trust these waters of life that mingle birth and death...all of them...all of it held in waters of *life*.

I don't know about you but I long to be in that flow, all of us, together, being nourished and sustained in the life-giving waters of God's Word-made-flesh. All of us, playing and splashing. All of us, basking in the Light as we are carried into the fullness of life by the river of rushing water.

This living water is meant to hold us, to nourish us, and sustain us. It is meant to give us life, abundant life, a good life. It is meant to quench our thirst. When we, together, choose to jump into the life-giving water that the Christ is offering, we will find that our thirst is...finally...satisfied. Instead of drowning in toxic waters of hierarchy and division and separation, we can share the birth waters of our oneness. Instead of clinging to our power and ego, to our positions and principles, to our disagreements and conflicts, we can let go

and remember that we are *already* being carried in the waters of life. We can release what we've been holding on to because Jesus has *already* birthed us into the life of the Spirit. Jesus has *already* birthed us into life in the Spirit so that we become part of the oneness that flows from Jesus' womb.

May we trust the life-giving waters flowing from Jesus' womb.

May it be so.