

Sermon: A Baptism on Pentecost. How Perfect is That?

Year A, Pentecost

[Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; John 7:37-39](#)

Offered June 4, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

The events in today's reading from the Gospel of John take place at the great Temple in Jerusalem on the last day of the seven day harvest festival of Tabernacles. A historian living at the same time as Jesus called it the greatest of the festivals.¹ And why wouldn't it be? They are a farming people. The vast majority of people were subsistence farmers, growing their own food with hopefully enough left over to pay their taxes and end up with maybe a little cash to buy the things they could not make themselves. They were subsistence farmers on the edge of the desert, so water was everything. Water meant abundant crops, abundant celebration, abundant hope for the coming year. Children born in years with plenty of water would grow stronger, would be more likely to make it to adulthood, back in an era when childhood disease was rampant.

The Festival of Tabernacles was even more than that. The Israelites were now farmers on the land between a desert and Mediterranean Sea. But they had been slaves in Egypt, set free by their God, led into the desert itself. They were so thirsty at one point that they considered going back to slavery in Egypt, where at least there was water to drink. In that moment of crisis, when they were struggling to believe that God cared for them, God ordered Moses to strike a rock with his staff, and water gushed out in the desert. In addition to the daily ceremonies at the Temple, the Israelites built temporary booths in such a way that that the sun and the stars could be seen through them to remember when they were homeless in the desert.² So in addition to thanking God for the rain that brought abundance into their lives today, this festival also remembered a time of great suffering and great doubt, when God reassured them that they were beloved.

It was into this greatest of festivals, that Jesus speaks to the crowd. Every year they celebrated the water that made the harvest possible. Every year they thanked God for what they had been given and asked that the next year have good rains for harvests as well. Every year they remembered how close they had come to not having this promised land in which to live, because they had almost turned back to slavery. Into this greatest of festivals, Jesus speaks. He tells them that their prayers for water had been answered in a way they did not expect; he tells them that the festival contained within itself the fulfillment of the promise of the Messiah.³ It might not look like that to them, because he was just a poor carpenter, not a great king or a military general. But there was a promise of something coming into the world that would keep God with them always. The Holy Spirit would make its presence known in the world soon, and God would be with them always.

It's often hard for us today to connect with the Biblical stories. For most of us, we just turn on a tap and clean, safe water comes out. Our children are vaccinated against diseases that terrified

¹ Meda A. A. Stamper, "Pentecost, Exegetical Perspective, John 7:37-37" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 21.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 247.

³ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John (i-xii) Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 29 of *The Anchor Bible*, eds. William Foxwell Allbright & David Noel Freedman, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1966), 327.

parents back then. But we do remember last summer. I know a number of you were taking your laundry to the Laundromat to ease the burden on your wells. The drought last year began early, so many of your gardens got off to a slow start and never picked up steam. We've had plenty of rain since. And when you look at the US Geological Survey's groundwater map for New Hampshire, you see green across the board, showing normal water levels. Except for the two test sites around Nashua. They're at red, less than 10% of normal.⁴ So while we may 2,000 years removed from the harvest festivals of Jerusalem, we still understand why they'd want to celebrate God's abundance with a festival of water.

We modern people understand how being thirsty is a great metaphor for the dry and barren places in our lives. We have all had places where we wanted to turn back, to turn away from our new life and return to our old life. Even if our old life was really enslaved to alcohol, or an unfinished degree, or the safe isolation of an empty apartment. Our souls were thirsty and we didn't know what for.

In ancient Hebrew, they thought that the soul was where thirst came from, since the word for soul, *nefeš*, originally meant "throat."⁵ *Nefeš* also mean spirit, like Holy Spirit. That was what Jesus was talking about, that a Holy Spirit would be coming into the world. The Spirit wouldn't replace our own decisions and actions and capabilities. The Spirit encourages, fosters and enlivens those whose listen and love, as Jesus did.⁶

Today is the Christian festival of Pentecost. Today we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world. The Holy Spirit has been in the world since the very beginning. But it took us a while to figure out how to recognize it and respond to it. That was another of Jesus' lessons, that God would always be with us in this world, in this life. Maybe not in the way we expected or thought we wanted, but God would always be there.

So how perfect is it to have a baptism on Pentecost? On our own great day of celebration to have a great ceremony involving water, reminding us of God's abundance and God's presence in our lives when the dry patches were going to turn us away from the lives God was calling us to. It is just so perfect to have a baptism on Pentecost.

Here is little Jace, cute as a button, a sign of God's abundance, clearly listened to and loved not only by his parents but by his whole tribe of grandparents and godparents and cousins and friends. In the ceremony, his tribe will increase, with a church family who will commit to watching over him and his growth. We are celebrating God's abundant love in the past and the promise of more love to come in the future.

Every parent knows that sense of overwhelming love they feel toward their kids. And they know that their kids will bring dry patches. Every mom has leaned over the crib murmuring, "Yes, sweetheart. This is what tired feels like. And if you would just stop howling and take a nap, this feeling would go away." Every dad has dug into his jeans pocket to hand over the car keys with some internal voice saying, "This is just not a good idea. But the kid won't know it

⁴ United States Geological Survey, "Groundwater Watch: New Hampshire and Vermont Groundwater Level Network," U.S. Department of the Interior, <https://groundwaterwatch.usgs.gov/NetMapT2L2.asp?ncd=NHV&sc=33> (accessed May 29, 2017).

⁵ Brown, 324.

⁶ Stephen B. Boyd, "Pentecost, Theological Perspective, John 7:37-37" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 24.

until it's over." Our throats choke up with love and dread, and we are thirsty to know that when our protection for our kids isn't enough, there is something watching over them.

Let us celebrate Pentecost together, let us celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in this world. The Holy Spirit moves with us, pointing out the springs and water courses that bring abundance.⁷ The Holy Spirit brings people to us, with tricks for getting the little monkey to sleep, or stilling the inner voice of dread when the car keys leave the house. The Holy Spirit surrounds our kids with people who will watch out for them, watch over them, when we cannot. Together with the Holy Spirit, we are the living water that Jesus promised his believers, at that great day of celebration, in that great ceremony involving water. That is what Jesus promises us today, with this baptism on Pentecost.

⁷ Arthur John Gossip, "The Gospel According to St. John: Exposition," vol. 8 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952), 588.