

The Gospel from John 'Feasts'

Pastor Jim Cords

August 14, 2022

This Sunday's texts:

Jeremiah 30:18-20

Revelation 22:16-17

John 7:37-44 and 8:12

The holy gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of John, the seventh chapter:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not yet been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." Others said, "He is the Messiah." Still others asked, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not the scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.

and from chapter 8, verse 12 of the Gospel of John:

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Lord God, we give you thanks for being clear, for showing us who you are, for promising to be with us, and for providing for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

When I was looking at the readings through the Gospel of John, it struck me that two of the things we don't talk about that much are the signs and the feasts. In the Gospel of John, there are seven signs and seven feasts. It seems as though the gospel writer is being very intentional to say pay attention to these things. Well, I don't know how many of you have a Jewish background or maybe you're close friends with someone who has a Jewish background who actually practices their faith and follows their feasts throughout the year. But in the seventh chapter of John, we see Jesus speaking in the context of one of those feasts. Let me put it in a bit of context because that particular feast happens actually in three feasts in a row. It's the end of what is known as the High Holy Days. It's a time of great celebration among the people of Israel and it's a part of remembering what

God has done for his people and his faithfulness to them. This comes at the very end and it's called the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths or that word that if I pronounce it in Hebrew, I don't quite have enough phlegm to say it right. I call it Sukkoth but those of you who know know that's not right.

The fun thing about this is that it is, in fact, a harvest festival feast. It comes at the end of the fall harvest when the farmers have brought in all the fruits of the field. They can visually see and experience the faithfulness of God to provide food for his people. It's a great opportunity to remember to give God thanks for that. By the way, it's known as a time of thanksgiving. In fact, there are those who argue that when the Puritans came to the United States, they knew this Jewish history and these festivals well and they actually fashioned our Thanksgiving after the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The second part of that feast is that they are to build these booths. The booths are a symbol of the dwelling during the forty years in the wilderness where again God provided for his people. So they gather in these booths. They often will have the children decorate them with fruit or other celebratory things. The intent is that they hang out in the booth together as family and friends and they even are encouraged to at the very least eat a meal and maybe even sleep in the booths, to remember the wilderness Journey and especially to remember God's faithful dwelling with the people of Israel during the wilderness Journey.

You will remember that during that time in the wilderness, God was there to guide the people. They weren't actually wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. The texts of the Old Testament teach us that God would stop and the people of Israel would set up camp in each of the twelve tribes. Remember we're talking about a million people here. I've noticed that it's much harder to get out of the house with two grandchildren. Imagine what that's like with a million people. So each of the tribes of Israel had their own jobs for how to break down the camp, move the camp, and set up the camp. So God would lead his people, then he would stop, and the people would set up camp. They would stay there until God moved. And God would lead them forward. Well, how did he do that? The scriptures teach us that it was a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, so that the people of Israel could look and see that God was both present and leading them.

So this is a great celebration. They even suggested that it was called a time of habitation, a time of dwelling. As we talked last week about the power of God to bring good out of all things, I might have underemphasized the promise of God's presence with us, even in the midst of struggle. Again, we do not struggle

alone. We struggle together with God's presence and in the presence of one another. We're reminded that this historic event, this celebration that happens among the people of Israel, among God's people, every year is expanded. Even as we hear in the prophet Isaiah, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God."¹

One of the powerful experiences of the people of God in the wilderness was the daily provision of manna, the daily provision of feasts or birds of the air that would provide meat for the people. The sad part of that story is the constant disappointment that the people felt, that they got tired of manna, or that they got tired of eating the same thing all the time. They forgot to be grateful for what they had and instead complained because they wanted greater variety.

I read a story recently about a grandchild watching his grandfather. Marilyn, I'm sorry if this isn't true of me in our lives. The grandmother serves dinner and as the dinner is going on, she asked the question "how do you like the meal?" Well, the grandchild already knows this is not Grandma's best and it's clear that Grandpa is not eating quite as vigorously as he usually eats. Yet the grandfather says "It's good. Thank you so much." He doesn't say anything about the fact that it's not a good meal. Afterward, the grandson is talking to his grandfather and he says "Hey Grandpa, how come when Grandma asked you about the dinner, you didn't tell her the truth that it was a bad meal?" The grandfather answered his grandson and said, "It is the truth that your grandmother feeds me almost every night and it's almost always very good. I wanted to emphasize the provision that she gives me every night, even if this particular meal wasn't that great." Be grateful. Be thankful. Acknowledge what we have. There is such a thing as brutal honesty. By the way, it isn't very helpful in relationships and I'm still trying to learn that lesson.

The people of Israel became known and understood themselves to be a people of God's presence. Brothers and sisters in Christ, as followers of Jesus, as people who have the promised presence of the Holy Spirit in us and with us, as we go through the ebbs and flows of life, let us recognize who we are - a people of God's presence. God is there to listen when we have concerns and complaints and hardships. God is there to listen when we celebrate and give God praise and honor and glory for the gift he's given us. But I'll tell you it is easy when times are hard to forget that God is there.

So I bring all of this up because the Feast of Tabernacles was, in fact, the feast that they were at the end of in this Gospel of John. We read from the

¹ Isaiah 41:10

seventh chapter. What we didn't read from was the sixth chapter and in the sixth chapter, Jesus says all sorts of hard things, including one of the hardest things he ever said. "Unless you eat of my flesh, you have no part of me."² Well, you better make that symbolic really quick. I mean that's a hard one. And as a matter of fact, what the gospel says is that many of the people who followed Jesus stopped following him at that point. It was too hard a word.

So, as we move into this seventh chapter, when we know that Jesus has already said all of these hard things and now he's a little more subtle. It wasn't subtle for them, but it is certainly subtle for us. At the Feast of Tabernacles, one of the things that happens is the priest will go down to the pool of Salome and draw up water. They'll come in and the procession will go around the altar once each of the first seven days and then on the last day, they'll go around the altar seven times and then pour out the water on the altar. There's a great celebration. The celebration is so magnificent for the people of Israel that one of their sayings was "if a man has not been at the Feast of the Tabernacles in Jerusalem on the last day, he does not yet know what real joy is." Of course, it's tied to the fact that God provided water, even from a rock, as they gathered in the wilderness.

Water sustains life. Now, when I said that in Tucson, it meant more. When you live in the desert, you recognize that. There was a summer when I was on sabbatical and I was staying at my daughter's house in Denver. I was riding out to try to build endurance for a later bike ride is going to do. I was riding over two mountain passes and then back as I went from Arvada to Boulder and back to Arvada. One of those days, halfway back in the middle of the two mountain passes, I ran out of water. It only happened once. Not a good thing to run out of water.

What Jesus says, as the crowds gather, as he comes to this last part (of the feast), again on the last day when they're ready to celebrate the pouring out of water, he announces "Let anyone who is thirsty, come. Let anyone who desires to drink freely from the water of Life." and he said, "Let him come to **me** and drink. I am the source of life-giving water."

Let's just be clear. The people of Israel have been celebrating for seven days the provisions of God. They've been remembering that God provided water and manna in the wilderness, that God's presence was there by the pillar of cloud and by the pillar of fire, and through God, they were provided water to drink. And Jesus says if you are thirsty, come to **me**. He could not have said it any clearer to the people there. I am God. I am the one who provides life for you.

² John 6:53

As we see in the text, as you heard read in the text this morning. People responded differently. Some wanted to soften Jesus' words. They said, "Oh no, he's a prophet."³ So he's allowed to talk that way, as if he is God, because he's speaking for God. Others got it completely. "This is the Messiah."⁴ This is the promised one we've been looking for. This is, in fact, God's habitation, God is dwelling with us, in person, in Jesus. Wow! And others said he's a blasphemer and he has to die. I am noticing none of you are tying a noose or doing anything else like that. I haven't seen anybody run out the door yet. My concern is it's not because you have one of these through provisions and the only one you're choosing is he's the Messiah which is, by the way, the best choice, but rather because these texts don't always impact us in the way they would have impacted the people of the first century. We have lost sight of the significance of what is here.

It's because of texts like this, that people like me, that pastors throughout the NALC, will argue that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and that there's no way to the Father but by him.⁵ It is because of text like this that say Jesus is uniquely the presence, the saving presence of God on Earth, that this is the way God has made to provide for us and to provide for us, not only life and provision for this life, but life-giving water for all of eternity. If they will come to Jesus, their eternity will be granted, will be assured. Of that, they can be confident. God does what God says he will do and he provides. Let me read it another way. "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'⁶ This takes the truth of the promise of salvation which, by the way, as Christians, we just love to hear. We have that hymn "I Love to Tell the Story." You know no matter how many times I hear it, I love to tell the story. I love to hear the truth of the Gospel.

This [scripture – John 7:38] suggests that not only can you hear and receive the truth of the Gospel, but that the truth of the Gospel will flow from you, that others will be able to see the hope of Christ in you and will themselves be drawn to that same life-giving Christ. It is why we are the church, not just when we're gathered in this building, but why we are the church wherever we are, however, and whoever we are. It's part of the reason we want to have a preschool because we want to make sure our children know they're loved by God, and know that God is present and available to them as they struggle through the unknowns of

³ John 7:40

⁴ John 7:41

⁵ John 14:6

⁶ John 7:38, ESV

their developing lives. As they go to school, they will know that that's a place where they're loved and that's true whether they're here or anywhere else because that's the promise of God for them. "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let them take the water of life freely."⁷ I want you to hear the truth in this text. It's a repeat of what I've just said. The Spirit says to you come and receive life. Let him who hears also say come, so that anyone who desires life can come and receive the Water of Life. The Lord Jesus comes so that we can know God, experience forgiveness, receive the gift of life and then through us, extend it to the world.

The one who is the true light, who gives true light to everyone was coming into the world. That's the first chapter of John and as John continues, we can see over and over again the fulfillment of the promises of God's creation and redemption and eternal life. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are the people of God and this is the promise. Wherever two or three are gathered in his name, he is here, in the midst of us. You are not alone. God walks with you, through each and every day, and each and every struggle, and each and every joy. Celebrate the good stuff and fellowship together as the people of God. Amen.

⁷ Revelation 22:17, New King James Version