

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 21, 2019

Soaked by the Spirit

John 7:37-44

It's not just what you say but when you say it. No one knows that better than Jesus. Today's Scripture passage from John is a good example. It's the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, a weeklong festival celebrating how God was with his people, guiding them and providing for them, during their wanderings in the wilderness. Each day of the festival, a procession led by a priest goes from the temple mount to the Gihon spring, where a golden pitcher is filled. The water is then taken to the temple and poured out as an offering on the altar. On the last day of the festival, called "the great day" (v. 37), the priests lengthen the ceremony by circling the altar seven times. That's when Jesus stands up and starts inviting people to come to him and drink.

Jesus isn't offering himself as just one available option to those who are feeling spiritually parched. He's making a radical claim about who he is and why he's here. According to Jesus' own faith tradition, the day would come when salvation would flow from the holy city of Jerusalem, and more specifically from the temple. So Jesus is declaring that he himself is the location of God's saving presence among his people and the source of God's life-giving power. Jesus invites those who are seeking life to come to him.

That's part of what we celebrate here today on the occasion of Abby's baptism. Her baptism is an outward and visible sign that she has accepted Jesus' invitation to life. What she needs most, forgiveness, freedom, and new life, aren't things that I can give her, or you can give her, or our church can give her. Jesus is the only one who can give these things to her. Now that doesn't mean you and I have no part in her experience of new life in Christ. We have been witnesses to Christ, pointing Abby to him, saying, "Go to Jesus. Believe in Jesus. Get life from Jesus." And by stepping into the water on this joyful day, Abby is proclaiming that Jesus is who he says he is, the one sent from God, and that he gives what he says he will give, new life.

Jesus says he will give living water to anyone who is thirsty. We're so accustomed to water that's on tap, just waiting for us to draw upon it. Or water that's purified and bottled, just sitting on the store shelf, waiting for us to purchase it. Or water brought to our table by the restaurant server, asking whether we preferred it with or without lemon, not to mention refills as needed. It's easy for us to lose sight of just how essential water was to life in the first century. Maybe this past week's temperatures, including today's weather, can stir us from our complacency and reawaken us to a sense of the renewing, refreshing, life-giving effect of water.

I spoke to someone this past week whose grandchildren had their swimming lesson cancelled because the water temperature in the pool was too high. As I recall, we've never had that issue in the baptistery here in our sanctuary. Actually, on more than one occasion, I've noticed the baptismal candidate shivering, at least slightly, as they prepared to be immersed. One person tells about how, when her church held a baptismal service, they had to use a neighboring church's baptistery. So when the church built an addition with a

baptismal pool, everyone was pleased, including the woman's daughter. The daughter and a friend were riding in the car and went past a pond. The friend proudly spoke up, "I was baptized in that pond." And the daughter responded with no less pride: "Oh, I was baptized in a Jacuzzi at our church."

The temple in Jerusalem wasn't equipped with a Jacuzzi. But God's people knew the significance of water. No wonder it's such a rich and powerful symbol throughout the Scriptures. In today's reading from the Old Testament, you heard the story of how God brought water from the rock in order to provide for his thirsty people as they journeyed through the wilderness. This wasn't a matter of inconvenience. It was a matter of survival. The people gave voice to what was at stake: "Moses, why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (Exod. 17:3). So Moses did as the Lord commanded, and where once there was the dryness of death there was now the liquid of life. Water came forth. Living water.

The water that Abby has stepped into today is living water. Not because we believe it has some magical properties that alter her biological composition, but because her baptism signifies her transition from death to life. Baptism declares that in order to be in relationship with God, and with one another, in the way God intends us to be, we need more than just a few moral adjustments, or a few spiritual rough edges smoothed off, or a few modest renovations in our hearts and minds. No, what we need is to be created anew. So our method of baptism vividly portrays the individual being swallowed up in a watery grave. With my arms and hands I raised Abby up from the water that had enclosed her. But it's the saving power of God that has truly raised her from the dead through Jesus Christ.

In John's Gospel, the link between water and new life is sometimes captured in the language of birth. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit" (3:5). Based on this text, and numerous others, the association between baptism and birth has a long history in the life of the church and its acts of worship. One woman tells about the experience of baptizing her own son as "like giving birth to him for a second time."¹ So again, salvation isn't a matter of striving to be a better person, but about being brought into existence as an entirely new person, by being joined to Jesus Christ by faith.

As we know, this newness doesn't take shape instantaneously. Abby didn't come up out of the water already fully mature in Christ. She has lots of growing to do and progress to make in faith and in what it means to follow Jesus in her life. If we expect the transformation to happen in the blink of an eye, then we'll come out of the water disappointed. One person tells about being the teacher of a "20-Something" Sunday School class. Part of his responsibility was to receive and review information for prospective members of the group. One person had noted on his sheet, under "Circumstances of Salvation," that he had "Accepted Christ in high school. Was baptized but would like to be reimbursed (crossed out)—reimmersed." In all my years of ministry, no one has come back to me asking to be refunded for their baptism, because they didn't experience the kind of life change they expected.

From a Christian perspective, the change we need comes from the work of the Spirit. So we shouldn't be surprised that the Spirit shows up in today's Scripture passage. According to John, when Jesus invites us to come to him to for living water, he's inviting us to come to him for the Spirit. "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive" (v. 39a).

The associations keep adding up: water, life, Spirit. The Spirit is the personal presence of God, in the life of the individual believer, and in the life of God's people together, bringing about the newness signified in baptism. The Spirit makes us alive in Christ. The Spirit makes us more like Christ. The Spirit gets us to our ultimate destination in Christ. Not that it's an easy journey. The people of Israel, under Moses' leadership, wandered in the wilderness, and had to rely on God for the provision and guidance they needed to finally make it. Jesus himself, after his own baptism, went out of the water and into the wilderness, to be tested in preparation for his own ministry. Remember that the gift of the Spirit isn't a magic wand that God waves over you while you're standing in the water, so that as you go forward you can avoid the hard and patient work of faith and transformation. No, the Spirit is the very life of God, life from God, making us into something that only God can make.

In one of his letters, the apostle Paul captures it well in what he says to one of his coworkers in church-planting: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7).

As I said, this life takes shape in us through the work of the Holy Spirit. But we have to be open to the Spirit's action in us. Sometimes we're not. Instead, we're resistant to, or closed to, what the Spirit wants to do. I like the way John Levison captures it in the following prayer:

Holy Spirit,
 I'm not so fond of transformation.
 I'm not so hungry for adaptation.
 I'm not so keen on modification.
 "Leave things as they are." That's my earnest prayer.

But how can I ask for this?
 And how could you possibly answer this prayer?

What could I be thinking?
 How little could I know you?

You're torrential.
 We're sopping, sodden, soaked.
 Caught in the downpour of your craving
 to transform us from inside out
 and also from outside in.
 Amen.²

Jesus says, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." Jesus invites you to come to him for living water. He invites you to come to him for new life. He invites you to come to him to be soaked in the Spirit.

¹ Quoted in *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Regent's Park College; Macon; Smyth & Helwys, 1996) 50.

² John R. Levison, *40 Days with the Holy Spirit: Fresh Air for Every Day* (Brewster: Paraclete, 2015) 133.