

June 4, 2017 – John 7:37-39

Storytelling is an important part of sermon writing. I like telling stories during my sermons. They can't be the substance of the sermon, of course. But the ability to illustrate a concept using a story can be quite valuable, and the ability to retell a Biblical account in an engaging way is, well, downright essential.

But, of course, storytelling isn't an exact science. It's an art. It's an art because it requires a careful intuition about what to highlight and what to minimize. What to put in a prominent position and what to gloss over, push to the end, or even leave out altogether.

And the more I preach sermons, the more I realize how necessary this process is. You cannot simply lay out the facts of a event without telling a story. You can't do it, one, because you'll end up telling a story anyway. It's just human nature. And two, you can't do it because nobody would want to hear it even if you could. It would be confusing and nonsensical and boring.

Which is why it really doesn't bother me to look at the Bible as a book of stories. Now, I don't in any way mean to say that the accounts written here aren't true and accurate and historical. But at the same time, they are still stories written by storytellers who, just like the stories I sometimes tell in my sermons, knew how to highlight, minimize, and rearrange information to make it the very best story possible. The kind of story you can read and understand and enjoy.

And when we look at the Gospels, we see that happening most prominently in the Gospel of John. If you're looking for biographical data presented in a comprehensive, chronological order, look at Matthew or Mark or, maybe best of all, Luke for your resources. But if you're looking for the story of Jesus' ministry, it doesn't get much better than John's Gospel.

Because John knew Jesus' message. With a clarity and passion that most disciples, ancient or modern, could only hope to have. So as a storyteller writing the story of Jesus' ministry and Jesus' message to other Christians and to us today, we need to respect the fact that there is a story here that you can't always simply slice an excerpt out of and expect to understand it. You have to read the larger story.

We have such a case here in our Gospel lesson today. A tiny passage. Three verses long. A miniscule chunk. But in many ways the conclusion, the punch line, the climax of a much larger story. A story that centers around water.

John Chapter 1, Jesus finds John the Baptist baptizing with water in the Jordan River. Chapter 2, Jesus turns water into wine. Chapter 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again of water and the spirit. Chapter 4, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he will give her water such that she will never go thirsty again. Chapter 5, Jesus heals a paralyzed man waiting by the miraculous water of Bethesda. Chapter 6, Jesus walks on water. And now, Chapter 7, *“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.”*

It's quite a story. Seven chapters long. Better written than anything I could come up with. But what does it all mean? What is John telling us by putting story after story of water together here? Or better yet, what is Jesus telling us by offering us springs of living water?

Well, John gives us a hint of that, right here in this same little passage. *“By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”*

By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Later to receive, in fact, at Pentecost, that we celebrate today. Through the sound of rushing wind and the sight of fire on their heads and the miracle of a hundred languages all understood at once.

And it would be easy to simply end the account of Pentecost right there, as a one time deal that was an amazing sight and no more. But that would miss the story that John has offered. A story that highlights not the sound of rushing wind or the sight of tongues of fire. But highlights instead water.

But not just any water. Living water. The water that Jesus gives. Water that's not just for the repentance of sins, like John the Baptist gave, but water that is for the forgiveness of sins. Water that doesn't just demand faith, like that which Jesus called Peter out of the boat to step upon, but water that provides faith even in the midst of wind and waves.

Water that doesn't just bring a person to life, like that which we see during birth, but water that brings a person to new life even in old age. Water that doesn't just turn into wine, like that in Cana, but water that promises the hope of a wedding celebration like the world has never seen, the wedding feast of Christ to His Church that has no end.

Water that quenches the thirst of body and soul. Water that flowed out of Jesus' side on the cross so that it could flow within each of us. And flow from within us to a world that is thirsty for faith and forgiveness and rebirth and hope for something better than the world around us.

The story of Pentecost may seem like a story of wind and fire, but according to St John, it's really a story of water. Living water. And that really shouldn't surprise us. Because the day of Pentecost may have begun with wind and fire, but it ends with water.

The water of Holy Baptism. The water poured over 3000 people who received the Word of God that morning and were baptized. The story of Pentecost is not one of wind and fire. It is the story of water. Of a veritable flood, pouring over the city of Jerusalem for the forgiveness of sins.

And it's a story that continues, because it's a story that's not just about those 12 disciples locked in an upper room. Or about those 3000 people baptized later that day. No, it's a story that's about you.

*"Whoever believes in me... rivers of living water will flow from within them."* Whoever believes in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is a gift of faith to all who believe. But even more importantly, faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit so that all believe.

There's a reason, a very good reason, why the prophet Joel, that Peter quotes in his Pentecost sermon, twice says that God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh. That not just a colorful image that he's using there. It's a literal, vivid description of how the Spirit is poured out on us in water. Poured out on all flesh.

So that everyone, sons and daughters, young men and old men, male servants and female servants, everyone might call upon the name of the Lord and be saved. So that we might make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything that Jesus commanded. So that through us, all people might hear in their own language the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord.

John the Baptist, the wedding guests at Cana, the Samaritan woman, the disciples in the boat, the paralyzed man at Bethesda, the disciples cowering in fear in that upper room. None of them asked for Jesus to come and perform a miracle. He just showed up. Because that's what God does. He just shows up and does a miracle.

He just shows up, like he does everytime a person is baptized. He shows up and does a miracle. A miracle that takes ordinary water poured on their flesh. And transforms it into living water flowing through their souls. For forgiveness. For faith. For rebirth. For hope. For a thirst that could not be quenched by anything else in all the world.

Pentecost happens here in this church. And there is no wind and there is no fire. But there is water. And there will always be water in each of us. Living water flowing to eternal life. Amen.