

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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Lesson 7 - John 7:1-52

Thirsty Ones! Come to the Water!

Farmers love good harvests. They also love water, especially when they happen to live in desert climates. Agricultural festivals centered on harvests and rain, are as old as history itself. The genius of Judaism—which Christianity would also evidence—was taking such nature feasts and making them religious festivals as well.

The feast of Tabernacles celebrated the autumn harvest and the hope for winter rain to help along the spring growing period. It also honored the memory of Israel's forty year pilgrimage in the desert after the Red Sea Crossing. As the farmers engaged in rain making rituals, the priest carried a golden bowl of water from the pool of Siloam to the temple where he poured it on the altar. The priest prayed for rain, but also implored God for an outpouring of the divine spirit of compassion. Rain for the earth. A divine spirit for the human heart.

There was a playful quality about this feast. Families built tents made out of branches and leaves and camped out for the eight days of the feast. This recalled the "tent days" of their ancestors in the desert. They looked back with nostalgia on the simplicity of life and religion in those olden times. In those nomadic days, people carried the ark of God (also called the ark of the Covenant) with them, and felt like free spirits in their never ending journey.

Their faith seemed more dynamic because their lives were more adventurous. Not being domesticated themselves, they envisioned God as equally unencumbered by the confinements of settled life. Seen through the window of history, those mighty ancestors traveled like pioneers of the spirit, exciting, romantic, daring, rugged, and heroic. They lived in the age of the giants of religion. When they chose a campsite, they pitched tents for themselves. And they made a tent—or tabernacle—for God's ark in the middle of the encampment. At times, God even "walked" with them when he appeared as a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire at night.

Their descendants in Christ's time hoped to recapture some of that religious dynamism in their eight day festivities of camping out in their leafy tents, singing songs, praising God, eating heartily, telling stories, marching in religious processions, playing games, and catching up on what had happened to their friends and relatives in the past year.

Tabernacles was the most cheerful of all Jewish feasts. Not the most important. That was Passover. Tabernacles was for them what Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July are for Americans, a mixture of patriotism, religion, and heartfelt gratitude for the bounty of the earth. This was not a churchy feast, but more of a family festival where faith had a light hearted tone.

Jesus Goes to the Feast (John 7:1-13)

It should be evident to the reader by now that John liked to arrange his gospel narrative about Jesus around the religious feasts of the Jewish calendar. Passover. Jewish Pentecost. Tabernacles. These feasts dealt directly with God's action in history. John's gospel did no less, for he clearly showed how Jesus, the Word become flesh, was reshaping history. And what better place was there to underscore this truth than at a liturgical festival?

One vivid connection between Jesus and Tabernacles was the tents. Thousands of people pitched their branch tents in the available spaces in Jerusalem (sometimes on rooftops) and outside its walls. Remarkably, the Word of God had come to earth and "pitched his tent among us." With a heady mix of nostalgia and history, blurred by distance, and romanticized by memory, the celebrants encountered in Jesus a new and unexpected realization of the ancient event of tenting in the wilderness. God the Father had walked with their ancestors. God the Son walked with them now, not as a mysterious cloud and fire, but as a visible person and friend. Love had found a way to be present to them in a manner totally unforeseen.

On the eve of the feast, Jesus and his disciples were doing mission work in Galilee. Jesus had stayed away from Judea because the religious leaders had obtained warrants for his arrest and made no secret of their plans to have him killed. They wanted to be rid of this troublesome preacher and wonder worker. The disciples did not realize the seriousness of the situation. Even if popular support for Jesus had waned in Galilee after the Bread of Life discourse, there was still a feeling that Jesus enjoyed considerable acceptance in the mountain villages and the fishing towns along the lakeshore.

Lulled by the pleasant Galilean mission, they did not quite comprehend the depth of hostility Jesus had caused among the powers that be in the south, the bureaucratic center of their religion. Authorities never like having situations and people they cannot control. This is how Jesus seemed to them. His ministry not only disturbed their standard approach to religion, but also was fraught with political dangers. He might upset the uneasy compromises they made with the Roman rulers. A threat to the social and religious order of things must be removed, violently if necessary.

The disciples wanted to be in Jerusalem for all the excitement and enjoyment of Tabernacles. They knew Jesus was reluctant to go. They tried to persuade him by arguing that he needed to let the broader world see how powerful his message was and how wondrous were his works. Jesus knew they still did not grasp the essence of his mission. "His brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5).

He resorted to plain and unsentimental language to instruct them. They did not appreciate the hatred he was attracting from the power of evil in the world. They did not yet experience such hostility because they had not begun to confront the evil that must be identified and fought against. He told them they simply had not yet realized the issue at hand, the conquest of evil and the hatred for those who would battle against it.

Jesus encouraged them to go and enjoy themselves at the feast. His “hour” had not yet come. The real “hour” would be the passion. Here Jesus seems to refer more to the opportunity for effective mission, because in fact he did leave for the feast soon after his disciples had departed. Jesus arrived at Tabernacles in the middle of the festivities when the receptivity to faith in his message would be greater. He was not worried about his safety. He was more concerned about the spiritual health of his beloved people and wanted to open them as much as he could to receiving his offer of salvation.

Send the Temple Police to Arrest Jesus (John 7:14-36)

Jesus arrived in a Jerusalem that was enjoying itself to the full. Tabernacles was at midpoint. The cumulative celebrating had generated a genial atmosphere in which the sacred and the secular purposes had blended to cause a widespread companionable spirit. Jesus proceeded to give some widely admired Scripture lessons. Trained rabbis were astonished that he could be so good at it, considering he had not taken any formal studies in the Bible. Such training consisted in becoming a student of a recognized rabbi, where one studied the opinions of famous rabbis of the past about the texts of Scripture. “How does he know Scripture without having studied?” (John 7:15).

The easy mood of the moment made Christ’s reply more persuasive. He told them he was trained by a very well known teacher—his heavenly Father. He had attended the best and most prestigious of all rabbinical schools, the classroom of God. Jesus explained that the effectiveness of his Scripture teaching proceeded from a life of obedience to his Father’s will and the intention of seeking only God’s glory, not one’s own. This comment about glory is “presence talk.” To seek God’s glory is not to conduct religious and musical fireworks to tickle a divine ego. Rather it means to open a window and let God’s loving presence be felt.

Thus mastery of Scripture is more than studying texts and famous opinions about them. That is indeed important. But without a life of obedience to God’s will and a commitment to unfold his glory presence to the world, the core meaning of Scripture will never be really known. In the last analysis, Bible study is an act of faith.

Suddenly, Jesus broke the pleasant spell of Tabernacles and the mild jousting between himself and his questioners. It was as though a threatening cloud had darkened those sunny moments. Jesus took the initiative and swept away pretenses. “Why are you trying to kill me?” (John 7:19). He questioned those religious bureaucrats about their lethal conspiracy. At another level he was putting the Prince of Darkness on notice.

It was evil itself which was out to destroy him, for “The Prince” knew that Jesus was determined to remove evil’s control over the human heart, not just in these religious leaders but in every person who was subject to evil and sin.

Jesus had shattered the “feel good” mood of Tabernacles. Unaware of the reality of evil’s intent against Christ and not informed about the plots of the religious leaders, the people roared out that Jesus was crazy. Who would want to kill him? Their outcry came as much from being irritated at Jesus for raining on their parade as from a genuine disbelief that anyone would even dream of killing him. Jesus then spoke of the murderous reaction to his healing on the Sabbath, something most pilgrims would have known little about.

The discussion turned to the subject of Christ’s origins. People were aware that Jesus was being called the messiah by some. They said he could not be the messiah because they knew he came from Nazareth. Such a statement was based on the theory of the “hidden messiah,” which claimed that no one could know the origin or birthplace of the messiah. He would appear “out of the blue.” That is why some thought Elijah would come again to identify the messiah and anoint him. Another instance of the hidden messiah theory occurred at Caesarea Philippi, where Peter had confessed that Jesus was the messiah. Jesus praised Peter for discovering what had been “hidden” from the eyes of all.

Jesus told them they may know his earthly birthplace, but they did not know about his heavenly origin. They were missing the truth about him both as messiah (their hidden messiah theory stopped that) and as Son of God.

Aware of his double claim to messiahship and divinity, the religious leaders sent temple police to arrest him. This is the first of two arrest scenes in the gospels, the other being at Gethsemane. In both cases the officers had no ability to touch him until he gave permission—which happened when his “hour” came. The attempts on his life led him to think about his death and his return to his Father after the resurrection

Wave the Myrtle Branches and Lemons (John 7:37-52)

Practically speaking, the most important aspect of Tabernacles was rain. Ardent prayers for rain were chanted. If rain fell during the feast, it was considered a good omen predicting that more rain will come, much needed for the fertile crops of the following year.

Every morning during the feast a rain procession was held. The pilgrims marched to the spring of Gihon at the foot of temple Mount. This spring supplied the water for the pool of Siloam, a kind of ancient reservoir. The priest filled a golden bowl with water and the people sang, “With joy you will draw water at the fountain of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). The people returned to the temple, marching through the Water Gate.

The pilgrims carried myrtle and willow branches tied with palm in their right hands. These symbolized their tents.

They carried lemons in their left hands, symbolizing the harvest. Gathered around the altar of holocausts in front of the temple building, they sang various psalms, waved the branches and lemons and swayed to the rhythms of the music. The priest ascended the steps to the altar and poured out the water onto the altar. The gesture imitated the falling of rain, “reminding” God to send real rain.

Amid the drama and color of this rain parade, the music, the gleaming gold of the water bowl, the lemons and myrtle branches—perhaps even an actual autumnal rainfall—Jesus stood up and said, “Let anyone who thirsts, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him’” (John 7:37-38).

The people had prayed for water. Jesus proclaimed their prayers had been answered. He was the real response to their hopes. Tabernacles always meant more than rain. It also contained within itself the hope for a messiah. Zechariah had predicted that living waters would flow from Jerusalem. Jesus announced the living waters were now here. Ezekiel had seen a vision in which a river flowed from a rock underneath the temple. Jesus told his listeners that he was the temple. A river of living water will flow from him. Moses had struck a rock in the desert and water flowed from it. On Calvary a soldier lanced the side of Jesus and water flowed from it.

What is this water? It is both the saving water of baptism and the image of the Spirit whom Jesus would send. There was a long and honored tradition in Scripture which connected water images with the pouring out of the Spirit. Ezekiel linked the sprinkling of water to the outpouring of divine spirit. Jesus had spoken of creating a new person out of water and the Spirit. This is sacramental talk. Earthly water. Divine Spirit. Creation and Creator joined together for a saving purpose.

In this passage we have a third example from John’s gospel in which a material element is given strong prominence. At Cana, Jesus produced gallons of wine. On a Galilean mountain, Jesus created barrels of bread. At Tabernacles, Jesus performed no water miracle, but drew a powerful Gospel message from a rain ceremony where water was on everyone’s mind. Bread and Wine would have sacramental significance in the Eucharist. The Water acquired sacramental meaning in baptism.

Admittedly, water imagery is prominent in the Baptist’s preaching about baptism and in Christ’s dialogue with Nicodemus about spiritual transformation. It is true that water was a central image in the conversion of the Samaritan Woman at Jacob’s Well, and it was the backdrop of the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda. But it is only at Tabernacles that water’s vivid imagery and symbolism obtains the fullest force.

One many argue that it was the artistry of John’s sure pen that created an incremental portrait of the imagery of water at the service of Christ’s preaching and saving ministry.

The gradual buildup from the Baptist to Nicodemus to the Samaritan Woman to the Pool of Bethesda to Tabernacles is like the swell of a symphony surging to an emotional climax amid the myrtle branches and lemons and music and a golden bowl—and yes, water. And above all, there is Jesus, from whom will flow water and the Spirit to wash us joyously in love forever.