

Sunday 4 Sunday 2016, Cashmere Presbyterian Church: PENTECOST

Sermon: Living water

Silvia Purdie, 4 June 2017

(goes with a powerpoint of pictures of Jacobs Well in Israel)

On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Next Sunday we will celebrate our understanding of God as Trinity, three in one, the creator Father God, the son Jesus Christ, and the Spirit.

Of the three, the Spirit is the hardest to pin down, to sum up in mere words. The Holy Spirit is more experience than concept, so we reach for metaphors to catch something of the dynamic of the Spirit.

We speak of fire as a way of describing the experience of feeling charged up, 'on fire', a metaphor for raw energy. We in Cashmere experienced the uncontrolled power of fire all too closely and it was not tame or safe. In the story of Pentecost the energy and vitality of God was almost visible; those there on the day struggled to describe what they saw but they saw the people enflamed by the Spirit as being literally alight, each one licked by a tongue of flame that danced and glowed, spiritual light in that moment becoming almost visible for those with eyes of the soul to see.

We speak of the Spirit as a dove, remembering the moment when Jesus rose up out of the waters of the Jordan river, being baptized by John, and there was Spirit in motion, a movement almost like a dove swooping down from heaven, a fluttering, falling, flash of light that you can see only out of the corner of your eye.

We speak of the Spirit as breath, as in the account in John's gospel when the Spirit came as the risen Jesus literally breathed on them. You can't see breath, you can't see air-in-motion, it is an experience of the skin as we feel it, it is an experience of the lungs as we breathe in and out, Ruach, essence of life, breath.

The Bible speaks of the Spirit in verbs: helping, comforting, inspiring, sustaining. The Spirit is God-in-action, God doing what God does, mostly hidden within the fabric of the universe, or hidden within the human heart, in a movement towards love, in a secret sense of being held, a dynamic upholding.

And we speak of the Spirit as water. The verbs continue as we celebrate the way God 'pours out' mercy and blessing, that grace flows. Scripture often speaks of the human condition as perpetually thirsty. "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness" said Jesus, "for they shall be filled". "Those who believe in me will never be thirsty" said Jesus.

So we come to John 4, Jesus met a woman in Samaria at a well, and he asked her for a drink. She could have just quietly done as he asked, but she was bold, she spoke her mind, she asked questions. She teased him: So, she said, you're a high and mighty Jew eh, but you still need water and I have the bucket. Well, well, fancy that.

And he responds by telling her about a different kind of water. She might have the bucket and access to the well water, but he can provide the very Spirit of the living God. Living water.

Living water is good, sweet, flowing water.

The Spirit of Jesus is alive with spiritual power. It is the essence of life itself. It flows from the very heart of God.

One of the highlights of my trip to Israel was visiting this well. It was the very same well that Jacob purchased on his travels through Canaan, maybe 2000 years before. The Samaritan woman refers to the well being a gift handed down from Jacob. The well has been in continual use ever since. Which makes it probably the most verifiably authentic Biblical site. The well hasn't moved. The water still flows, as it has done ever since the well was dug. It is deep, 35 metres down to water level, the hole is 41 metres deep. That's quite a lot of turning of the crank handle.

Photos & talk about the well

The water flowing through the hills coming out at springs, underground channels

It is such a deep metaphor (literally) for spirituality. Where do you go to draw water? Where do you do to drop down into a source of deep joy? Of stillness? Where do you go to be re-energised?

Some people talk about going for walks in the hills. Others get inspired by being with special people. I am rather fond of an afternoon nap on occasion, curling up in my own bed, reading and praying. You might even feel 'topped up' by coming to church! I certainly hope you do. Sharing together in worship regularly is a central way that Christians have found through the centuries to experience the inflowing of the Spirit.

But – but what about when it's raining and you can't get out walking? What about when the people you love are not around, or too busy to hang out with you? What about when I have meetings and work to do all afternoon and don't get time to myself? What about when (heaven forbid!) church feels boring or when you disagree with things that are said or feel that you don't really belong?

How then can we access the flows of the Spirit?

Must we depend on external sources for our spiritual refreshing?

And what about when nothing seems to work for us, and no matter what we try we feel dry, thirsty, starved? Somewhere along the line you will find that things that used to bring you life dry up; you put down your bucket and there's no water there.

What Jesus promised the Samaritan woman, and all of his followers, is this:

The water that I give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The Samaritan woman had to walk a distance to the well from her home. "Give me this water" she said to Jesus "So I don't need to keep coming here".

Wouldn't it be amazing to have constant, consistent access to life-giving spirit-water?

On our tour we visited 3 archaeological sites of cities that dated back 7, 8, 10 thousand years. Built by the ancient Canaanites in the Jordan rift valley, with high walls and strong defences. They stood for thousands of years and became powerhouses of civilization and technology. Within those walls some of the very earliest wheels were invented, as well as writing, and jewelry, currency and cooking. The one thing that made all this possible was that each city had its own spring, its own guaranteed source of water, right there inside the walls. The land all around might be dry as a bone, but people living in the city could draw as much water as they needed.

It's only when we have our own inner source of living water that we can stand strong against attack. Only then can we sustain a life of sacrificial service and achieve great things. Only then can we not be tossed and turned by the winds, or run here and there looking for a new toy or partner or a new church or different friends or jobs, as our society trains us to do. For ultimately nothing else will satisfy. All else but Christ leaves us dry in the end.

The Spirit of Jesus is a bottomless infinite supply. And it is available to each person, to you and to me, at any time no matter how we are feeling or what we are doing. The gift of Jesus is the power of Jesus, not mediated, not earned by your goodness or purchased by your efforts.

The blockage is at our end. It's us who limit the flow of the Spirit.

The more we invest in faith, the more we agree to trust in him, the more we're willing to hand over to him, the more we can breathe deep of his breath, the more we tap into his love.

Each time we relax and allow God's Spirit to flow in us, each time we follow a nudge, each time we pause in stillness, each time we choose to step into forgiveness ... the living water flows a little stronger.

And, of course, it is not for us alone, but that we might give it again, so that we ourselves may be a channel of living water, and more than that, that we might lead others to the source itself, who is Jesus Christ.

I'd like to finish with this icon painted by the priest in the church of Jacob's well. I wonder if you could sit with it in silence for a moment. It shows several people at a cross-shaped pool of living water, flowing from Jesus. I wonder if you identify with any of the people in particular? I wonder if you can share in their joy and delight at drinking of the Spirit together?

Welcome to worship at Cashmere Presbyterian Church

A new day dawns, new joys, new possibilities

The Spirit of God flows in our hearts

Though all else crumbles and turns towards death

The Spirit of Christ brings life into every moment

We come this morning thirsty for more

The Spirit is moving! We are alive!

Prayer of confession

Almighty God, we confess that we come so infrequently to your well to draw water, only when we are desperate.

Forgive us for allowing our fear and our habits to keep you out of our daily lives

Almighty God, we confess that we come to your well with buckets too small

Wanting only a few drops of your goodness, enough just for today, enough to get by on

Forgive us for seeking only a little of you when you offer us all that you are.

Almighty God, we confess that through our words and our actions we prevent others from coming to your well. We are afraid to offend, afraid to come across as though we have something others do not, afraid of the inadequacy of our own faith in the face of the world's problems.

Forgive us for not speaking of your life-giving power, for not inviting others to drink of it.

Almighty God, you know our hearts, our failings and our pride. Wash us now in your mercy as we come thirsty for your Spirit.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ has poured out upon us his priceless gifts of forgiveness and freedom. Christ has accepted you. Christ has blessed you. Be at peace. Amen.