

<Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34; John 7:37-39>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Living Spirit, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Around this time each year, Memorial Day weekend, I always feel the draw to revisit the television miniseries “Band of Brothers,” which follows the soldiers of Easy Company of the 101st Airborne through their World War II campaign. It begins as they train and prepare, and then follows them as they parachute into France ahead of the D-Day Invasion, and then continues with them through the war, leading the viewer to Carentan, then through the Battle of the Bulge, the liberation of the Landsberg concentration camp, and finally onto the taking of the Eagle’s Nest. Throughout this miniseries we accompany them through hardship and trial, through battle and rest, through sorrow and loss and relief...all the ups and downs of their campaign against the Nazi threat. And every year, as we approach this solemn holiday in our country’s memory, I find that I want to reconnect with the men of Easy Company, and revisit their story.

Except that what I find I want to revisit most is not one of their major battles, or a notable moment in their military campaign. Each year around Memorial Day I find that I want to rewatch the final episode of the series, “Points,” which finds these soldiers that I have vicariously accompanied in the days of May 1945, in the aftermath of the Nazi surrender. Having emotionally journeyed with them through the trials and difficulties and loss, on Memorial Day I want to rejoin them as they begin to step away from warfare and combat, and begin to dream of life after the Army.

It’s cathartic to dream with them, to join with those who have braved the worst of war as they envision the life that is to come after the war, in which combat and aggression no longer dictate and define their living. The scenes and encounters of this episode reflect both a gratitude for one another’s shared fellowship and experience, as well as a celebration of hope realized as the war comes to an end; it is a summation not only of their present mood but a callback to past experience and the looking forward to the future hope being realized. It is a time of joyous celebration and thanksgiving, one which was echoed and lived out around the world as countries and communities began to likewise live into a world that would not be determined and defined primarily by warfare and conflict. To see a glimpse of that hope for their future realized, to join in that celebration, is profoundly meaningful to me.

It is a similar atmosphere which we find in our reading from John’s gospel. Jesus and the disciples are in Jerusalem to celebrate The Festival of Booths. It can best be summarized by one of the commentators I read on this passage, who writes, “The Festival remembers the way that God provided for the Israelites in their desert wanderings and is when they ask for God to send rain for the year’s crops. The people also looked to the future hope promised in passages like Ezekiel 47, where a river flowing out of the temple in Jerusalem provides all the fish one could catch and where the fruit trees provide their crops year-round, without fail. In other words, a promise of

abundance! It is a festival to celebrate providence" (Chelsey Harmon, Center for Excellence in Preaching).

So great, so rich and vibrant is this celebration, and the hope that it conveys, that on the final day the priests enact God's living abundance and waters of life by collecting water from the Pool of Siloam - the Pool of Healing - and then pouring it out as a water offering, as streams of healing and wholeness flowing from the Temple altars.

And in the midst of this celebration, in this midst of the heightened emotions and religious-endorsed revelry, in the midst of remembering the past of God's providence and presence, and hoping for the future of God's redemption and favor...in the midst of all of this Jesus stands up, and proclaims, crying out for all to hear, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Wild. Unthinkable. Scandalous, even.

To use a bit of theological imagination and creative thinking, it would be akin to celebrating that time of the end of the war in Europe, reflecting on what has been, remembering those who have been lost, hoping for the future and dreaming of living into the peace that has been longed for...it would be akin to being in that moment, with parades and acclamations being made, and Jesus stands up to proclaim, 'I am truly the way to peace, and if you desire true peace then come to me and be a peace-maker.'

Wild. Unthinkable. Scandalous, even.

As our commentator continues, "It's at this point [in the festival] that we are to understand that Jesus YELLS that he has the fulfillment of the prayers and the offerings made at this festival: he has God's provision that connects past, present, and future. Jesus describes it as being thirsty and coming to him to quench one's thirst."

In a festival of remembrance, celebrating God's provision of water from the rock in the wilderness and manna from the sky, a time of dreaming and envisioning the future of abundant, well-watered and nourished crops and streams of life flowing from the heart of the temple, in just such a moment, Jesus calls us to think the unthinkable - that such a reality has already begun to arrive and take root.

What are we to do, today, with such a proclamation? Perhaps, as we consider to ponder this question, we will find some more understanding from our other reading from Acts, our Pentecost reading. For today is, again, the Day of Pentecost, and we proclaim the coming and abiding of the Spirit of God.

Peter and the other apostles are gathered together in one place, and as they are gathered, "suddenly" the Spirit of God comes and rests upon each of them, as of tongues of flame - there's a reason the liturgical color of Pentecost, and the presence of the Spirit of God is red; it reflects the Spirit's arrival in a manner akin to tongues of

flame. And as we join the apostles now abiding in the Spirit’s presence, it is not hard to remember their question to Jesus at his ascension just a day or two previous, which we read last week, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

We don’t always make the connection very strongly, because the readings are split up and proclaimed on different days, different weeks, but we move almost directly from their question to the proclamation of the Pentecost event. And when we pair the two more closely, we find that a tacit, unspoken answer to the apostles’ question of ‘whether now is the time the kingdom will be restored’ is for God, in the Spirit, to provide them with the capability to speak in such a way that all peoples, all nations, all backgrounds and ethnicities might be able to hear the good news in their own native tongue. As they are. Where they are. Who they are.

The answer to the question of realizing the kingdom of God is the ability to speak to all peoples, everywhere and without interpretation, about the kingdom of God.

At the Festival of Booths, wherein the people gathered to celebrate and remember God’s presence in the past and promise for the future, Jesus proclaimed - loudly! - that such a stream envisioned was already flowing and ready to be claimed. A river of life for all who were thirsty; a river of hope for all who were in need.

A veritable river of understanding, proclamation, and invitation; of the kingdom presence and God’s abundance, now flows through the apostles, through the church, through the ages, to be realized and lived out. And we are downstream of it.

On this Memorial Day weekend we still remember; how could we not? And even as we remember, we claim the hope of what we strive for in the world, a tangible presence of peace, with gratitude for the sacrifice that led us to it. On this Pentecost Sunday, we still remember, as well, that we are downstream of a river of life, vitality, and abundance which flows from the heart of Christ, which we, in the Spirit of God, are able to claim. And we do this, too, with gratitude for the sacrifice and example of Jesus in our own lives. We remember the promise of God for the Kingdom of God, and we are equipped to proclaim and share that Kingdom with and for all. The river flows, and we flow with it. May we always remember. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*