

Sermons from West Denmark



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

Pentecost

Sunday, May 24, 2026

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John 7:37-39

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Entering this passage the first we hear is this festival that’s the setting for Jesus’ words; a couple passages back you find this is the Festival of Booths. This was the fall harvest festival, sort of like Thanksgiving, but it did double duty. It was called the Festival of Booths because people would cut boughs to build leafy shelters and then camp out in them for the duration. I love this idea—I wish we still did it, every October, once the bugs are fewer, everybody hits the woods to camp for a couple days. The point, however, was not to get back to nature but to reenact Israel’s wandering time in the wilderness, when everybody lived in tents and relied directly on God’s provision. Bringing in the harvest, God’s people were to remember a time when there was no harvest, when they ate directly from God’s hand: manna from heaven, quails dropping out of the sky, water coming from a rock.

In Jesus’ outburst at the festival—and it’s an outburst, not a sermon—“Jesus stood up and cried out,” like he couldn’t hold it in anymore, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink!”—he is drawing on the memory of this time when Moses brought water out of a rock so that every thirsty Israelite could drink their fill. Now Jesus says, “Everyone who’s thirsty, come to *me* and drink.” This would have been shocking, ground-breaking—I’m the new Moses, Jesus is saying, or even someone more than

Moses. / will give you water, living water, not stagnant water—clear, living, running water, the kind you would gulp if you found it in the wilderness.

He's reprising the theme he used when he spoke to the woman at the well, who came to draw water and he said he could give her living water that would quench her thirst forever. Of course, not wanting to haul water, the woman wanted the stuff. In his conversation with her, Jesus emphasized drinking this water, receiving it. Now at the Festival of Booths he goes further. Those who receive this gift, who drink it, "Out of their hearts will come springs of living water." The cool, sweet water is a gift, a gift for anyone who comes to Jesus thirsting, to receive, to drink. But that's only the beginning. Because the water is living—it keeps flowing, overflowing, it has to spill out. So the gift isn't just a blessing for the person who receives it; it's meant to minister to others.

The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the temple, destroyed by invaders and in Ezekiel's time not yet rebuilt. In his vision of the new temple, he says, "Behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple." He goes on in great detail to describe how deep the water got the farther it went from the temple, and he speaks at length of the fish that live in the water, and the trees that never wilt because they grow alongside it. This rock in the wilderness, the temple, is the presence of God in the world, and out of that presence springs living water, a great river that feeds many and allows them to flourish.

Let's get back to Pentecost. Did you know Pentecost was another harvest festival? In Greek it was called Pentecost because you counted out fifty days after Passover; in Hebrew, it's called Shavuot, or the Festival of the First-fruits. Whatever you call it, it celebrates the wheat harvest in Israel, in which a part of the first harvest of the year (for us, that's rhubarb, asparagus, chives, morels) was offered back to God, again to remind the people of their dependence on God's good gifts. Shavuot also came to be a celebration of the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai, another gift of God, the covenant that would allow the people to live in relationship with God. When God gave the Law, Mount Sinai was covered in clouds that flashed with lightning, and Moses went up into the holy cloud to commune with God.

Shavuot was a pilgrimage festival, in which people were supposed to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate, Jews and devout Jewish-practicing Gentiles, and it was while they and Jesus' disciples were gathered to celebrate that the spirit of God first came on the people in Jesus' name. It sounded like a mighty, rushing wind. The noise drew more people to see what the ruckus was about, and they saw a strange thing. People with bits of fire coming from their heads—this is not a normal thing, I can't really imagine it or explain it, but apparently they weren't burnt by it—and they were all speaking foreign

languages. This wasn't the gobbledygook that we Lutherans find uncomfortable, but actual world languages spoken by the foreigners who had gathered to worship, but not heretofore by any of the Galileans who found themselves, to their surprise, speaking fluent Arabic and Elamaic. It was like the coming of the Spirit was so powerful that even language gaps were no barrier—people could not help but understand “the mighty acts of God.”

Some people get really fixated on the speaking of tongues as the mark of God's Spirit's work, but why aren't we fixated on the “divided tongues as of fire” that rested on each of them? Why don't we have *that* these days? I don't think people know what to make of it: I've seen the Sunday School pictures of people with little candle flames floating above their heads—what's the point of that? It seems silly.

When God spoke to Moses in the wilderness, before the great Exodus and water out of the rock, before the giving of the Law, God called to Moses out of a bush, a green, living bush that nevertheless was burning, this flame, licking at the leaves without themselves igniting. And it drew Moses, the mystery of it, how could a thing burn but not be consumed? The ground was holy because God was there. Moses took his shoes off, his toes on holy dirt, the holy kicked up onto his ankles and knees when he fell there in awe, while the green leaves licked with fire.

That was the fire that licked the heads of the people at Pentecost, a living fire, burning but not consuming, and we forget, two thousand years later, that this is the same God that roared flaming among the green leaves, the same God lowering in a flickering cloud over Mt Sinai, the mighty rushing wind that hovered over the waters at Creation and howled like a hurricane into the room at Pentecost. Two thousand years later we've tamed the Spirit into a gentle, heavenly dove, we wear red on Pentecost and eat cake loaded with red dye number 40, but open your eyes! Our heads are burning with the flames of God's presence—we should give fire helmets to our confirmands—are you sure, Astrid, you want to join this flaming band?

We are the leafy boughs in which God makes a home; we are the rocks in the wilderness out of which stream living water. The living water, it flows into our hearts and flows out again, and it's no stagnant holding pond, not even a bubbling brook, it's a mighty flood, you can't dam it; forget building dikes to direct it where you want. The Spirit flows like a hundred-year flood, sweeping you and everything else away with its bewildering force. This is glory at hand, not sequestered on a mountain or a temple, but here, in me, in you. For a moment at Pentecost, at the burning bush, the veil was pulled back and we saw the glory licking at our heads and not burning us all up. But that glory still flames among us today. How have we forgotten this?

Everywhere we go is holy ground. A seed was planted there, which was the cross of Jesus, and the harvest from that sorrow-planted seed continues to this day. The harvest is the Spirit—God!—the flickering cloud of holiness no longer contained on the mountain or in the temple but moving in to live within every thirsty soul.

Are you thirsty? Are you ready to put on a fire helmet? Dig your toes in and prepare for a flood. Batten down the hatches. The wind will blow, and it will blow hard. You might not like where it takes you, because God is a flaming thing, not a tame dove, and the flood of God's fierce love sweeps everything away, even the things we cling to, the things we thought we knew, the sandbags we piled up.

Still—pick up your feet and let it carry you away. Open your soul and let the living water, the reckless love, that spills out join the flood.