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Water in the Desert - John 7:37-39

Every Sunday, as many of you have heard so many times, we begin our worship with water, water as a symbol of the Spirit of God, and our worship as an oasis in the desert of life where that water can be found.

While preparing for today, I was surprised to realize that the Holy Spirit is described in the Bible with each of the four classic elements of creation: earth, air, fire, and water. The ancient world knew four elements, four basic building blocks of all that is: earth, air, fire, and water. Scripture uses all of them as symbols for the Holy Spirit - or, better, embodiments, expressions of the intangible Spirit that we can see, feel, touch, experience.

Since today is all about the Holy Spirit, we'll look at each, but in reverse order: water is our theme; fire is the symbol of the birth of the church - the fire that separated and settled on each of the believers in Jerusalem we read in our call to worship, as was the "mighty windstorm."

But where's the earth? To get to that, we need to look some more at water.

You know, even though we live in a very, very dry place - truly, a desert - water is all around us. All we have to do is open a tap, open a bottle, open the fridge - water's there. You don't look out at it, unless you're watching a golf course early in the morning, or can see one of the water hazards; it's not as if you're out in the ocean, surrounded by the stuff. The only ice that's truly broken on the Santa Cruz River fell out of someone's cooler!

Yet as far as land animals are concerned, the ocean might as well be a desert; as the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" stuck it into our language, "water, water, every where/Nor any drop to drink." All that water in the ocean, and none of it, as it is, could keep us alive.

And thousands die each day because they cannot find water that they can safely drink. It's polluted by chemicals, by dirt, by waste.

But when you have to drink, you will. In the book "Unbroken," as Louis Zamperini, the World War Two airman who found himself floating on the Pacific for over forty days soon discovered, a person will drink seawater and die; a person will drink the blood of a sea bird to stay alive. You could die of thirst on an island surrounded by water thousands of feet deep.

In too many places on this beautiful, blue planet people have to drink from puddles and pools, from rivers and wells that would kill you and me within a day or two - and already kill even those who are accustomed to it.

One of my cousins worked in the US Consulate in Tijuana, Mexico, in the 1980's. I stayed with them a couple of times: every visit, they reminded me to rinse my mouth out with bottled water after brushing my teeth.

We have no choice but to drink.

The really bizarre - and extremely human - thing is, that here in this strangely bountiful desert, with water available almost everywhere, people who have everything they need and access to all the water they could ever drink end up in the Emergency Room or lying on the floor while a paramedic puts IV fluids into their dehydrated - under-watered - body.

Genesis, a book, remember, written first to a people who lived in a desert as dry and unforgiving as ours, says that even before there was earth, there was water. Water above, water below, water out of the chaos that was the beginning of creation – and God's Spirit hovered over the waters. And then came the rest.

Jesus, in this passage that John says is a sort of preview of Pentecost, tells of water, living water, running water that covers and

soaks everything, working its way into every crevice and crack as it spreads over, in, around, and through all the believers in Jesus Christ, filling us to overflowing.

So, there is the living water of the Spirit, one of many ways to describe the invasive quality of God, and there is the water we have to have to survive.

It sometimes is a little surprising to consider, but the Church, as it began back in Jerusalem, had a purpose, a purpose that far too often gets lost when we consider “church” today: the church was the fellowship of believers and those who were becoming believers and those who wanted to know more about what these strange people believed. Their whole existence centered around three things: worshiping and learning more about God, upholding each other as they lived their lives, and giving people God-stuff, God-truth, God-Spirit, God-water to take to others, so they could be a part of what God was and is doing.

So. Here we are, worshiping, and I hope learning – a never-ending process. Many of us work hard to uphold each other as we travel together through life. How many of us take what we come together to receive and provide it to others?

Our Mission Statement, as this, Valley Presbyterian Church, is right there on your bulletin: “To know Christ and make him know

through word and deed.” That is what our own mission is set to be.

How are you living that mission?

Mission is a slippery word, and means different things to different people. If you’ve been a part of the “Changing the Conversation” discussions, you’ve hear yet another word, “missional,” which on one hand complicates and the other simplifies matters.

Most people of our age group think of mission as something done far away with – or to – strange people by others we send money to. That was not the mission of the Pentecost church, or the Missional church.

Let’s take this back to water. There are churches and believers who feel compelled by their faith to take containers of water out into this desert surrounding us and leave it for the thirsty people heading North.

There are other churches and believers who are sending money to those places I talked about before, where there is no safe water to drink, so that facilities can be built and provision can be made for people to drink. Some of them even organize teams to go to those places and help to build these things.

Just like with those who put water out in the desert, there are clubs and groups all over this region and our country who do things like these: they feel a compulsion to take care of others' need for water.

And VPC? What do we do? I want to suggest to you that our mission is to be Missional: to be a church of the Pentecost, and to spread that water of the Spirit. That is a task that can and should involve all of us. All of us. If you can be here now, you can do this.

You spread the water of the Spirit by coming alongside those in need. And, friends, that's nearly everyone. You spread the water of the Spirit by sitting with someone who needs a companion for a few minutes, by holding the hand of someone who can't get out of bed anymore, by offering a kind word, a smile, a word of encouragement, and ear. Patience. Presence.

Shortly after I arrived here five years ago, someone shared with me a story about an encounter with one of our people, long since gone to her reward, who, when she said something so blunt as to be rude and the person telling me this, a bit surprised, asked her if she shouldn't be a little more polite, answered, "At my age, I don't have time to be polite."

Let me suggest that we have time to do nothing else, if we choose to live the faith that has been handed down to us. To be polite. To be

helpful. To sit quietly as someone sleeps, heals, dies, and pray for and with them. To be the Holy Spirit in flesh and blood – the Comforter, the Advocate, the paraclete in Greek – to those around us. If you're here, you can do this. You can say or gesture "thank you." You can show that you love others as children of God.

And this, finally, is where the fourth of those classic elements of creation we began with comes in: earth. We are, Scripture tells us, made of clay, earthen vessels; modern science might even go so far as to call us star dust, made from the substance of the universe, the stuff of creation itself, and we are the embodiment of the Spirit, the wind of our breath, the fire of our message of salvation, the living water of the sustaining spirit.

You are the water in the desert. Drink deep here, and then carry it out to someone else who thirsts, but may not even know what they need, or can't understand what they need, or isn't even aware that they have a need.

You are the water in the desert. Or, at least, the ones who will carry it.