

## Come, All You Thirsty

September 12, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

*Texts: Isaiah 55:1-13  
John 7:37-39*

18 months. 545 days. 78 Sundays. Since so many of us last gathered in this space. Let's take another breath, and let that sink in.

Come, all you thirsty!

Come to this river of life!

Even if you're still tuning in from afar -it's ok. Join us and feel the robust invitation to be together and to continue not only on this Sunday but in this extended season of regathering and coming home! Will you pray with me please?

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and redeemer!*

Come, all you thirsty, indeed! When we chose our theme for this day and season we were looking for something gentle enough, wide enough, and deep enough to hold us all wherever we are on this strange and ongoing journey through Covid! Rest assured we will sing our opening hymn again in the coming weeks because it so beautifully captures that longing and raging and weeping we've all been doing yet with it too a sense calm, sweet, strong renewal.

So, I ask you.... Are you thirsty? Are you raging? Are you weeping? Yes? All of the above? Me too! Are you a worried or worn down by all the waiting and wondering? Yes? Me too! Are you despairing about the state of our world, politics and planet? Yes? Me too! Are you moved to tears by Peter's exquisite organ and a live choir? Yes? Me too! Are you glad, even joyful to be back or coming back soon? Are you still feeling awed by the wonders of technology such that you can join and regather with us from anywhere in the world? Are you grateful to be in community, to have a space of grounding and growing and acting? Then say it with me. Yes! Me too! Then come in all the more to this deep and abiding river of God's mercy, love and delight. Let it hold and carry whatever you are feeling. Let it bind our journeys together again.

Long before Peter and Kate wrote our hymn, and deep bow to you both for it, Isaiah already had the idea. Isaiah says: "Ho!" (Don't you love that?) "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!" Interestingly, scholars remind us that Isaiah 55 was written right on "the verge of Israel's return from exile in Babylon." As such, there is a joyful welcome, an "exultant invitation" to everyone – and not just Israelites!<sup>1</sup> Come all who thirst! Come to the waters! Come to the feast! Come home again to the great household of God where there is room for us all, to quote another favorite First Church

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/20/life-and-death-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

hymn. This is a chance to recast our covenantal bonds, to regather at a banquet of connection and redemption and joy! And that same flowing river of God's invitation still connects us after so many centuries no matter if you are at home or here with us, you are part of that deep belonging, that the water is wide and warm and there's room for us to gather and delight, whether you are just dipping in a toe or diving deep!

On the one hand, Isaiah's words echo Lady Wisdom's divine invitation in Proverbs 9 wherein "she has built her house, set her table and calls out to all ...Come, eat... drink...live and walk in the way of insight!" On the other hand, for Christians, the imagery here recalls Jesus's own watery invitations in John. Do you remember what Jesus says to the woman at the well? "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give will never thirst. The water I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." And just a few chapters later in our passage from John, it's the same image: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and the let one who believes in me drink. Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." The theme carries right through to the last chapters of the last book of the bible, Revelation. "To the thirsty, God will give water from fountains of the waters of life."

I realize that was a lot of Bible to swallow, but I trust you caught a few drops. This image of a river of life, a spring or fountain of living water, would have been familiar to ancient listeners. You see, throughout scripture, this so-called living water carries with it, God's dream for our lives and our world. In it, God's spirit and blessings flow towards a New Heaven and New Earth, toward a world ordered by divine mercy and love and justice. The good news for us is that we are invited by God and Christ to come to this water, to gather by it, to drink of it, to be vessels that hold and channel it for a time. The image is metaphor for those spiritual wellsprings within each of our lives which yearn for lasting connection to God and God's love. The question before us is how we tap it into it and let God's blessings flow through us and God's dream manifest in us!

Well...it starts in part by identifying those places where we are thirsty, longing and feeling ready for more! So, let me ask again, on this Regathering Sunday, is anyone thirsty? I don't mean for the lemonade we'll be serving on the lawn. I mean spiritually thirsty! As in...are you gasping for some good news maybe, or for some connection - online or in-person? Are you yearning for some face to face 3-D proximity? Are you longing for a fairer world, for clearer skies and a cleaner planet? Are you parched for a deeper sense of purpose, for clarity about how to use your gifts and how to make a difference in this moment? Are you dry-mouthed and breathless for some holy rest because you've been walking through this Covid-laced, mask wearing, Zoom wilderness for too long? Well then...scripture says, "*blessed are you! Blessed are you who hunger and thirst! And, Jesus says Come! Come to me! Come all you thirsty!*"

Martin Smith, the former Superior at the Society of St. John the Evangelist, a monastery located a few blocks from here on Memorial Drive right along the Charles River has a wonderful commentary on this image of living water. He shares a story of how while still a grad student in Worcestershire, England, he was pursuing an interest in local history by investigating the existence of ancient wells and springs that were once known to carry healing waters. He'd read that in the Middle Ages, pilgrims with eyes diseases had traveled to a small-town seeking healing at those supposedly therapeutic waters of a nearby spring. After hours of probing local fields of this town, spade in hand, he was about to give up when he noticed some cows standing atop a stinking mud patch. He wondered if they were guarding the secret that had been hidden for centuries! After twenty minutes of digging in the dung, his spade hit stone and he soon uncovered a carved platform from which protruded a wooden pipe. Moments later, up to his

knees in manure, “pure water poured out in steady flow,” he writes. He had found the place of pilgrimage and healing! He wryly notes that those fastidious Edwardian ladies and gentleman had failed to find the spring because they had hurried past the stinking mud patch. He adds that we too often pass over the place of the Spirit’s indwelling in the same way, seeking to ignore all those unpromising and murky places in our own guts!<sup>2</sup>

“Out of the believers’ hearts shall flow rivers of living water.” Smith and other scholar know that the word “heart” here is better translated from the Greek to mean guts, belly, viscera. Right out of the believers’ guts! “So, the home of the Spirit,” Smith writes “is not in the intellect, the realm of concepts and ideas, not in a refined interior sanctum of spirituality, but in the guts, the deep core where our passions have their spring, the place of conflict, confusion, vulnerability and desire.”<sup>3</sup>

If this is true, then God’s spirit dwells not merely with us, but within us, in something like an aquifer of our hearts. It lies beneath all the surface crap of our consumer driven daily reality, beneath that toxic stench of human selfishness, greed, hatred and division. Beneath the horrendous headlines, beneath the climate catastrophes we’ve caused, beneath our bodily exhaustion, beneath even those heart-wrenching moments of grief, fear, dread and despair we all feel. Beneath all of that overwhelming, anxious-making mud and muck that we barely know what to do with, and whether we see it or not, God’s spirit is always there, deep within us, like a wellspring just waiting to be tapped. Bore deep enough, through hard rock of our intellectualizing ways, through our cold-hearted cynicism, through our best defenses, bore through and let those tears of our deepest longings begin to flow, and we too can find that underground stream of living water! It’s there that we find that calm, clear, renewing and forgiving river about which we sang! And Jesus says, “Come!” “Dig into it together! Gather and regather here. Dig through it! Tap that stream! Drink it in! Let it meet and quench your deepest longing!” Come all you thirsty! Come, to the river of life! Let it bubble up and burst forth with effervescent joy like that bubble machine I encountered at a friend’s outdoor dance party on Friday night!

Yes, I know, it’s not always easy to go there. There are moments when even our spiritual lives run dry, times when the well feels so empty no matter how hard we pump, when those sources of grace and kindness and joy have run out, times when we dig and can’t find the spring or fountain! If you are in this place now, hear these words of Denise Levertov who writes in her poem called *The Fountain*:

*Don't say, don't say there is no water  
to solace the dryness at our hearts.  
I have seen  
the fountain springing out of the rock wall  
and you drinking there. And I too  
before your eyes  
found footholds and climbed  
to drink the cool water.  
The woman of that place, shading her eyes,  
frowned as she watched-but not because  
she grudged the water,  
only because she was waiting*

<sup>2</sup> Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1989), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1989), p. 23.

*to see we drank our fill and were  
refreshed.  
Don't say, don't say there is no water.  
That fountain is there among its scalloped  
green and gray stones,  
it is still there and always there  
with its quiet song and strange power  
to spring in us,  
up and out through the rock.*

First Church, the living waters are still there and are always there for us, and they surely are springing from this community today, right here and right now.

One more interesting tidbit before I close. Years ago, I did some research on the underground of Cambridge and I discovered and shared an interesting piece of our own local history. Did you know that back in the late 70's when the tunnel for the red line extension from Harvard Square was being dug, the engineers ran into a natural aquifer? The obstacle set the project a full year behind schedule. And do you know where they installed the pump to help drain the flooded excavation? Right outside these doors, on the Cambridge Common! The pump was only temporary until the extension project was complete. But you can bet that the aquifer is still there! In the ancient Near East, temples were built atop and sometimes structured around natural fountains. I have to wonder if our spiritual ancestors had something like this in mind when they built the first churches of Cambridge. Though the pump on the Commons was only temporary, it's on us now to be a natural if not spiritual resource, a wellspring and a pump that is far more lasting and thirst quenching, one that taps into God's dream and ever flowing blessings, into a vision of a New Heaven and New Earth, of a world where everyone, rich and poor, black and white, lgbtq, indigenous and immigrant, is invited of to drink of God's living waters together.

So again, I say. Come, all you thirsty! Come, for out of the believers' hearts and the heart of this community shall flow rivers of living water! May it be so on this tender, tear-filled and joyful day and in this season of our regathering! Amen.