
THIRSTY
JOHN 19:25B-30
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 15, 2022,
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

God had all the water in the world. In the beginning, God swept over the face of the waters as the waters heard the first words out of the moist mouth of God—let there be light! In the beginning, God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. God had all the water in the world and created the world amid the waters. There was clearly no drought or water shortage or deserts as God created the Seas. There were only lush gardens like Eden.

God had all the water in the world so unsurprisingly the faithful psalmist could declare, “As a deer longs for flowing streams so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” Why not? Because God had all the water in the world and was a spiritual reservoir who said through a prophet, “Come all you who are thirsty; come to the waters...”

So it all makes sense that this same God incarnate in Jesus Christ has so much water to give. It’s like an angel poured water from a baptismal font all over the Gospel of John to drench it with the generous oasis of God. In John, there’s so much water that Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. In John, like other gospels, Jesus can often be found on the water in a boat. In John, even when the Samaritan woman at the well asks about living water, Jesus says, “Everyone who drinks of this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” Jesus even walks on the water, in John, and afterwards he tells others, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” and he says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.” Even last night, we heard that in John, Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet. It all makes sense because God had all the water in the world.

But later in John, the one who supposedly never had a water shortage, the one who says he can quench our thirst, finds himself thirsty. The one who was before was was, the one who was before the waters were, the one who spoke words of light over primordial waters, is thirsty? “When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” Someone please find God a sweet tea right now because this is a sorrowful and sour-full situation. Jesus is thirsty.

The one who offered living water to the woman at the well somehow finds himself in a dry wooden hell. ‘I thirst.’ The wellspring of life, the *fons vitae*, is seemingly parched and dried up “like a raisin in the sun” (Langston Hughes). The one who had all the water in the world is about to experience a drought of death while on crucified lockdown. Jesus is on death row and one of his last words to the world and all of its waters is ‘I thirst.’ Can someone please find Jesus a cup of water?

The waters of the world were not only drying up in his body as he hung high and was stretched wide, but the world’s waters became sweat drops of blood. Crucifixions were an agonizing way to die and it’s even worse when for some in our day, it’s a way to live. Extra-heavy breathing and heaving makes Jesus a dry and weary land where there is no water. ‘I thirst’ and “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast, my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.”

Does anyone have some sweet tea or a cup of water? After he says, ‘I thirst,’ someone does have “a jar full of sour wine.... So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.” The one who turned water into wine at a wedding, sips sour-tasting wine at his imminent funeral. The bitter taste was a foreshadowing of his bitter end. He turned water into wine, but this wine turns into his blood.

I *thought* God had all the water in the world. But on the cross, this water is blood as the sign of the branch of hyssop tells us that Jesus will be the sacrificial Passover lamb for the world. ‘I thirst’ is probably the most human of his seven last words. Not magisterial by any means but very mundane. Ordinary. Human. God meets us in Jesus in the ordinary, in the mundane, in our torn human flesh, in our thirst, on our modern-day crosses.

We may think God is so far away, so unlike us with all of that holy water gushing out at the springs of creation, but tonight, we see again that God is like us in Jesus. God is with us in Jesus. Jesus is one of us because he’s human and hurting and in need of help on this old-rugged cross. There is a strange halo hovering over Golgotha’s hill because at the cross, we see the light that shows us how Jesus knows our deepest thirst and when we hear him say, ‘I thirst,’ we hear the voice of our own hearts and see ourselves in him. He says what we may not want to say or acknowledge. I thirst. He became one of us to save all of us. His cry is our cry. His thirst is our thirst.

In those words, Jesus is saying, “I know you. I know what it is to be human. I know what it is to hurt. I know what it is to be left hanging by other people. I know what it is to be an outcast. I know what it is to be lonely. I know what it is to be thirsty. I know what it is to die alone. I’m you tonight.” I thirst.

We may not want to believe it or accept it, but Jesus asserts it for us—we thirst. We may try to stop it or make it go away or quench it unsuccessfully. Those with Jesus gave him sour wine, a cheap painkiller for people condemned to crucifixion. But that painkiller does not stop the killing of Jesus. That painkiller does not quench the thirst of Jesus. It only adds to the bitterness of it all. No painkiller can take away our thirst. It might kill the pain momentarily but not eternally. No pill, no product, no practice, no pursuit can quench what we are thirsty for.

And for what are we thirsty? Jesus speaks these words—I thirst—after he establishes a new relationship as mother and son between his mother and the disciple whom he loved. It was after *this* happened that he said, ‘I thirst.’ There is nothing like losing your mother. He was losing his momma, the one who held him in her womb, so his thirst was for his first home in the water of the womb and for his best friend whom he loved dearly. He was thirsty for genuine relationships and community, real communion. In other words, Jesus was thirsty for love. He thirsts for love, as he was going to be separated from loved ones for three days, which is much shorter than the last two years of disconnection and separation during a pandemic. His thirst for them was his thirst for us. And if Jesus was thirsty, surely, we are. We are thirsty for love too but maybe we’ve been drinking from all the wrong taps to quench our thirst.

It’s ordinary and human to be thirsty in this way. The question is, how do you quench that thirst? The answer is on the cross. The answer is Jesus. Just as his thirst is on the cross, bring your thirst there to Jesus. Nail it to the tree of Calvary. Nail it and leave it there where the only one who can quench our thirst is. He receives all of our human thirst that it might be quenched forever.

And all the water in the world cannot solve our thirsty problem. The ancient poet was right, “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” Bring your thirst to the dying, loving One who’s thirsty for us and says, “I thirst for you. I thirst for your love.”

Will you thirst for him and love him in return?

May Jesus’ testimony and ours be: I was thirsty, and you gave me love.