

The Festival of Shelters

Three times each year all males who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem were required to attend three very special feasts: The Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths or Shelters. Many people would journey from much farther, of course, although those living at a greater distance might only come to one of the three great Feasts of the Jews. The most popular one, the one that drew the greatest crowds, was the last one, the Feast of Booths or Shelters or Tabernacles.

Why was it so popular? Well, for one thing, it was a bit like going to summer camp. Your family would build a shelter or booth out of branches and leaves and would live in that shelter for the whole week. Jewish people still do observe this feast, though not always in Jerusalem. If you have Jewish neighbours who live in a makeshift shelter on their deck or in their back yard for a week in early fall, you are watching people enjoying the Feast of Booths. Of all the feasts in the Jewish calendar, this one was the most joyous.

There were three main ceremonies associated with the Feast of Booths: the drawing out of water ceremony, the ceremony of lights and the theological reflection on the time when God lived in a tent during Israel's wandering in the wilderness, a tent that was called "The Tabernacle". That's why this Feast of Booths is also called the "Feast of Tabernacles". So, those are the three main features of this feast, the things that people who came to the feast would be in anticipation of. Let's look at them one at a time and, in each case, we'll look at what Jesus did and said in response to the ceremonies going on around Him.

First, then, we'll try to get a feel for what took place during the drawing out of water ceremony. The focus of this ceremony was remembering the miraculous work of God when He commanded Moses to strike the rock in order to produce enough water to satisfy the thirst of a million and a half to 2 million people. The people had been grumbling and complaining against Moses and yet God didn't withhold from them the provision they needed. He gave in abundance and the people were satisfied and so this ceremony was not just about the water, but was also about the graciousness of God in response to a complaining, negative, sometimes rebellious people.

Here are some of the texts that were regularly read at some point during the Feast of Tabernacles. First, Isaiah 48:21:

They did not thirst when God led them through the desert. God made the water flow out of the rock for them. God split the rock and water gushed forth.

Psalm 78:15,16

God split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them abundant drink like the ocean depths. God brought forth streams also from the rock and caused waters to run down like rivers.

Psalm 105:40,41

They asked and God brought forth quail, satisfied them with the bread of heaven. God opened the rock and water flowed out. It ran in the dry places like a river.

This image of water rushing out of the rock in the desert became a prophetic picture of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the prophets began to speak about. Just as the water in the desert had refreshed parched throats, so the coming of the Spirit would refresh parched souls and bring life and joy.

Again, the Scriptures contain many references to this promise, and these too were recited during the Feast of Booths. Isaiah 44:1-3:

Now listen, O Jacob My servant and Israel, whom I have chosen, do not fear, for I will pour out water on thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants.

Joel 3:18:

It will come about in that day that the mountains will drip with sweet wine, the hills will flow with milk and all the brooks of Judah will flow with water and a stream will come out from the house of the Lord.

Zechariah 13:1 and 14:8

In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for all the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for impurity and it will come about in that day that living waters will flow out of Jerusalem.

So these two dynamics - the remembering of God's provision of an abundance of water in the desert, and the promise of a coming outpouring, this time of the Holy Spirit - are the context for one very meaningful ceremony called "The Water Ceremony".

During the ceremony, people would be carrying palm branches tied to myrtle and willow branches and would shake them loudly at set points in the reading of the Scriptures - including some of the ones we've just looked at. Some folks would cut willow branches and build a large canopy over the altar and the people would march around the altar, shaking their branches and singing the words of Psalm 118:25:

*Please, LORD, please save us
Please, LORD, please give us success*

This was, essentially, a prayer for rain and it was thought that if it rained during the feast of booths that they could be sure of early spring rains and a good crop the following year.

While the one group has gone to gather willow branches, another group of worshipers follows the priest as he goes to the Pool of Siloam with a golden pitcher to bring water back to the altar at the Temple. The priest pours the water into a special bowl on the altar and the crowd sing the question, "Why has Torah commanded, 'Pour out water on the Feast of Tabernacles?' The Holy One, blessed be He, has commanded, 'Pour out water before Me in the Feast of Tabernacles in order that rain for the coming year may bless you.' The congregation would then chant the words of Isaiah 12:3

Therefore with joy you will draw water out of the wells of salvation.

The Jerusalem Talmud - that's a collection of the sayings of the rabbis during this period and beyond - connects this pouring out from the golden pitcher into the bowl on the altar with the promise of God to pour out His Spirit.

After this pouring, a choir would sing all of Psalms 113 - 118, the so-called "Halal" psalms - 'halal' being the Hebrew word for praise. This was the emotional high point of the entire feast and came with an eager anticipation for the age to come when the Father would pour out His Spirit on all flesh. The rabbis would say that the person who has never seen the joy of the water drawing ceremony has never seen joy in his life.

So, all of that is the context for John 7:37 and 38:

On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds.

I'll stop there for just a second - the custom of the day was for a rabbi to be seated before he began to teach, but here Jesus stands up and shouts - the word suggests that Jesus screamed with emotion at the crowds gathered for the Feast:

If you are thirsty, come to Me! If you believe in Me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within."

So, in this environment, charged with expectation of the promises of God being fulfilled, filled with hope that the Spirit would be poured out, Jesus screams out, "I'm here to fulfill the promise of the Father; I'm here to so fill you with the Holy Spirit that it will be like rivers, like rivers of living water pouring out from within you." And the response from the crowds is, predictably, divided. Some believe, saying things like, "He is the Prophet", or "He is Messiah", while others are skeptical.

As a backdrop to this story, a group of Temple guards had been sent to arrest Jesus right at this time and they returned to the leading priests and the Pharisees empty-handed. "Why didn't you bring him in?" these religious leaders demanded. "No one ever spoke like this man," they replied. No one in history has ever said the things Jesus said or done the things Jesus did, and that's still true today.

The second major event during the Feast of Booths is the "Illumination of the Temple" which took place in the Court of Women. I have a vague memory of teaching you about this ceremony some time ago, so I'll just touch on it briefly today.

On the first night of the Feast of Booths, four huge candelabras were hung in this part of the temple with large containers of oil attached to keep them lit. Each candelabra had four golden bowls in them - 16 in all. At sunset, they were lit and, according to the Jewish Mishna, all of Jerusalem reflected the light. It was bright and it was beautiful. This would be repeated every evening except for the last one.

Now, what was the significance of this "Illumination of the Temple"? Just as the water ceremony drew people's thoughts back to the time when Moses struck the rock and water came out, the illumination ceremony took people's thoughts back to another significant part of Israel's wanderings in the Sinai Desert. Can you think what that would be?

It's very easy to get lost in that part of the world and the people of Israel needed a guide to help them. God was their guide and He used a pillar of fire by night and of cloud by day to show the Israelites where to go. This was a powerful visual reminder that God is both able and willing to be a guide to His people. Many Old Testament texts would be read during the Feast that reminded the people of God's guiding light during the wilderness period and His willingness to be their guide.

A couple of examples, beginning with Psalm 43:3:

*Send out Your light and Your truth
Let them guide me
Let them lead me to Your holy mountain
To the place where You live*

Isaiah 60:19

No longer will you need the sun or moon to give you light, for the LORD your God will be your everlasting light, and He will be your glory.

Others that would be read at the Feast of Booths would include Psalm 27:1 and 78:13,14 and Isaiah 2:5 and 60:1. Again, you see that people's minds are filled with these images of light, both from the brightness of the candelabras and from the texts that are being read to them. After the candelabras have been extinguished for the final time, after the seventh night of the Feast, in the same Court of Women and the Treasury where they had just been lighting up the city, on the next day Jesus says:

I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life. (8:12)

This was not a subtle message about some inner light spirituality. Jesus was saying that just as God had moved with His people through the wilderness as a pillar of fire and had directed them and had kept them from stumbling through the darkness, so He was the light that would keep them, His listeners here in the Temple, from stumbling. And, more than that, He was the light that would lead them to life!

This is a powerful message and, when you link it with the last offer of living water to anyone who was thirsty, you see that Jesus is telling people that He is what they need, that He is offering them what they need for life. Who can say that, except God? Who can say they are the bread of life or the light of the world or the good shepherd except for God Himself? That's what Jesus is saying about Himself and that's why He is getting and will continue to get an increasingly hostile response.

The third and final big point from the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, is from the theologically heavy parts of the liturgy for this Feast.

Remember that this Feast is celebrated for over a week with people living in booths or shelters. Why? To remember that when they became a nation, when they escaped the slavery of Egypt, they lived in tents during the 40 years they spent in the wilderness - free from Egypt, but not able to enter the Promised Land. Even more importantly, the Living God, their God, chose to live among them, to dwell among His people in a special tent called the Tabernacle.

Exodus 25:8 says it very directly - God speaking:

I want the people of Israel to build Me a sacred residence where I can live among them.

He repeats this thought in Exodus 29:45,46:

I will live among the people of Israel and be their God and they will know that I am Yahweh their God. I am the One who brought them out of Egypt so that I could live among them.

The central focus of the Feast of Tabernacles was, therefore, the presence of the living God. Just as He had been present with them in the wilderness, He was present with them as they looked back to that time in Israel's history.

In the verses that made up the liturgy that was read during this Feast, there was frequent repetition of the phrase "I am He". When the Old Testament was translated into Greek - before the time of Jesus - they translated this phrase by the words "ego eimi"; "ego" means "I" and "eimi" means "I am"; so, "I, I am". Because of the connection between this Greek translation and the original meaning in Hebrew, our English translations will often render the "ego eimi" as "I am He". The Hebrew words which are the basis for that translation are "ani hu". By the first century, by the time that Jesus was walking around Galilee and Judea, preaching and healing and doing wonderful works, those two words - ani hu - had become the all-inclusive summary of God's self-revelation, God's way of speaking about Himself, in the Feast of Tabernacles.

At one point during the Feast a choir of priests would sing at the altar, "God is in His holy temple" and a priest, speaking for God, would say, "Be still and know that I am God." And then the other priest would chant, "Ani, Ani Hu, Ani, Ani Hu, Ani, Ani Hu, Ani, Ani Hu, over and over again." And the crowds that were gathered would wait in expectation that God would show up in some wonderful, powerful way. "I Am, I Am He ... I Am, I Am He".

And this is the background for this last great proclamation at the Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus tells the Jewish leaders that He's going and that they will not be able to follow Him. They don't understand. Then He says this:

You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not. That is why I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am who I say I am, you will die in your sins. (8:23,24)

They get it and they demand that He tell them who He is. This is followed by a long discussion about their true ancestry. They claim to be descended from Abraham while Jesus tells them that they are children of the Devil because, like him, they can't accept truth. They won't embrace what is true and right and real. They get angry with Jesus and ask Him if He thinks He is greater than Abraham. Jesus tells them in verse 56 that Abraham rejoiced as he looked forward to Jesus' coming and they shoot back, "You aren't even 50 years old. How can you say that you've seen Abraham?" And Jesus

responds, “I tell you the truth; before Abraham was born, I AM.” Right in the middle of the Feast of Booths, Jesus utters the sacred phrase, referring to Himself - “Ani hu”, I am He.” And they pick up stones to stone Him, but He slips away from the temple grounds.

So, here’s the point of the stories John tells about Jesus’ visit to the Festival of Booths, or Shelters, or Tabernacles:

1. Jesus tells an audience filled with expectation that God will pour out His Spirit on His people, “If you are thirsty, come to Me! If you believe in Me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within.”
2. On the day after the final “Illumination of the Temple”, Jesus stands in the same part of the Temple and declares, “I am the light of the world. If you follow Me, you won’t be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.”
3. And to a crowd that is celebrating the fact that God’s presence went with His people, all through their wilderness wanderings, a crowd that had heard the priests chanting the shortest phrase that acted as a summary of God’s revelation of Himself, “ani hu”, “I am, I me He”, Jesus says, “Unless you believe that I am who I say I am, you will die in your sins,” and “Before Abraham was born, I am”.

In every one of the major aspects of this Feast, Jesus declares Himself to be God. “If you believe in Me, come and drink … I am the light of the world … I am He.” And all this in the context of a Feast in which the Jewish people remembered God’s presence with them, His provision for them, His gift of guidance to them. It’s impossible to miss if you’re looking closely at these texts and the Jewish leaders didn’t miss it - they tried to stone Him for blasphemy, for claiming to be God, right there. And from then on they never let go of their plots against His life.

Before we take communion today, I want us to take just a couple of minutes to reflect on who Jesus is … and then on what He has done for us. I’ll have some words scrolling on the screen - take time to think about how those words reveal Jesus to you, how they connect you to who He is … not some long time ago, but who He is to you today.