

Pentecost Sermon

John 7:37–39 & Acts 20:19–23

Fire has fascinated me for as long as I can remember.

One of my earliest memories is of a “Funkenfeuer” in the Allgäu region of southern Germany, where I grew up.

It is a traditional bonfire at the end of winter: a tall wooden structure is built and then set on fire as a sign that winter is being driven out.

I must have been about three years old. I remember standing there in the cold, looking up at the flames, watching the sparks rise into the night sky. I didn’t understand traditions or symbolism yet. But I knew: this is something bigger than me. Something I could only stand before and watch in awe.

Later came the youth fire fighters – which was very common to be a member for small towns like the one I grew up in.

There I learned that fire is powerful and not to be taken lightly. It can warm, but it can also destroy. It demands respect, attention, responsibility.

And then there were campfires—bonfire evenings at youth camps. Someone almost always had a guitar. People sang Christian songs, secular songs, sometimes both. It was never perfect, but it was real. People sat around the fire, watched the flames, grew quiet, laughed, shared stories. Even now, those moments remain deeply meaningful.

I experienced that fire changes the atmosphere. People draw closer. Words become more honest. Silence becomes fuller.

It is no surprise that the Bible often uses fire imagery when speaking about God.

At Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit appears as “tongues of fire”—God’s presence breaking in with power and transformation.

And yet, in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus uses a very different image.

Not fire. But water. Jesus stands up in the middle of a festival and cries out:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink.”

He begins with something very human: thirst. Thirst is not abstract. It is immediate. It tells the truth about need. And then Jesus continues with a promise that is at the very center of this text: “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

John explains that he is speaking about the Holy Spirit. Rivers of living water.

Not a drop. Not a moment. Not a small relief. Rivers.

This is abundance. Movement. Overflow. Life that does not stay contained.

Jesus is saying: the Spirit of God will not only come to you from the outside. It will become a source within you. A spring that does not stop at you, but flows through you.

From thirst → to spring → to rivers.

That is the movement of Pentecost in John’s Gospel.

And Acts 20 shows what those “rivers” look like in a real human life.

Paul says:

“I served the Lord with all humility and with tears... I did not shrink from doing anything helpful... And now I am on my way, bound by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me.”

This is not a controlled or comfortable life. It is a life in motion. A life being carried forward.

“I am bound by the Spirit.”

Not self-directed. Not static. But also not lost.

There is direction—even through uncertainty. There is flow—even through tears.

Paul’s life is what it looks like when “living water” is not just an idea, but reality.

A life that moves forward because it is carried.

Fire and water belong together in the biblical imagination.

Fire speaks of God’s power that breaks in from the outside—like the bonfire of my childhood, standing in the cold and watching winter give way to light.

Water speaks of God’s life that flows from within—deep, sustaining, and overflowing.

And perhaps those campfire evenings hold both: people gathered, a guitar playing, voices blending, something happening among them that no one fully controls—but everyone is part of.

That is the life the Spirit creates.

Not always loud. Not always predictable. But always alive.

Like fire that warms.

Like water that flows.

Like rivers of living water that cannot be contained.

So maybe the question of Pentecost is not whether we can fully explain the Holy Spirit.

But rather:

Where am I still thirsty?

Where is God becoming a spring within me?

And where are the rivers already beginning to flow beyond me?

“Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”

Amen.