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The Gospel of John
XXIII. Much Muttering about Jesus
John 7:1-36

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The Feast of Booths was a big deal – one of the three annual festivals in which all of Israel was expected to take part. All Israel was to gather in Jerusalem for eight days of feasting and festivities. Leviticus 23 lays out the basis for this celebration – and, in fact, there are two.¹ First of all the Feast of Booths was a harvest festival. It came at the end of the harvest season and was a time of rejoicing and thanksgiving for the harvest – much as in our annual Thanksgiving Day observance. Looking ahead, this first meaning of the Feast of Booths will play a crucial role in understanding next week’s passage, where Jesus stands up on the last day of the feast and announces, *“If anyone is still hungry or thirsty, come to me.”*² But that’s next week.

Our passage this morning focuses in more on the second meaning Leviticus assigns to the Feast of Booths: namely, that it serves as a reminder of the forty years when Israel was wandering in the wilderness before God led them into the Promised Land. Feast of “Booths” as in “tents” – all during the feast the people would reside in hastily built tents to remind them of those forty years living in tents in the wilderness. Here it is, straight from Leviticus 23: *“You shall dwell in booths for seven days . . . that your generation may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of Egypt.”*³ If the Passover Festival – the biggest of the three annual festivals – served to remind the people of Israel of God’s deliverance of them from their slavery and suffering in Egypt, the Feast of Booths served to remind them of how God had taken care of them, led them, met all of their needs, during those forty years of wilderness wandering which followed.

But our passage this morning brings up another aspect of those wilderness wandering years – something not quite so good and glorious and worthy of celebration as God taking care of them in the wilderness. What our passage this morning brings up about those wilderness years is how little faith Israel showed in God during those years. How often Israel had muttered against God and His anointed prophet, Moses. God, throughout the wilderness years, was trying to teach Israel that He who saved them from Egypt was also the One who could show them how best to live in the new land to which He was leading them. But it was a lesson Israel refused to learn in the wilderness. So much so that both Moses and his successor Joshua had to challenge Israel, on the brink of their entrance to the Promised Land, to knock off the muttering and the unfaithfulness, and start obeying the Lord if they wanted life to go well for them in the Promised Land. Here’s Moses giving that speech, Deuteronomy 30:

See, I have set before you life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish.⁴

Joshua's version of that speech is equally straightforward and uncompromising – it includes those familiar words: *“Choose this day whom you will serve . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”⁵*

So that is the background to what is going on in our passage – and so also the key to understanding our passage. Our passage consists of five scenes, and the first four scenes have to do with that same question Israel faced in the wilderness – will you trust in the Lord, believe in Him and obey Him? Only this time the stakes are much higher, because it is God in the Flesh, Jesus the Son of God, who speaks to them. Or, to frame it in a slightly different way, in the first four scenes we see Israel muttering about Jesus just as much, if not more than, their ancestors muttered against God and His prophet Moses in the wilderness. And scene five is Jesus, like Moses and Joshua before Him, basically saying to Israel that a time of choice has come upon them if they wish to live – if they wish to receive the eternal and abundant life He has brought to them, if they wish to enter into that even greater Promised Land to which He would lead them, the very Kingdom of heaven.

So, Scene One, verses one through nine. Jesus is back home in Galilee because the Jewish leadership centered in Jerusalem and Judea were actively looking to have Him killed – and, as He tells His brothers, it is not yet His time. He says this because His brothers are telling Him that He really should go up to the Feast of Booths in Jerusalem because there He could really draw a crowd. They tell Jesus that doing these miracles and healings out in the sticks of Galilee is small potatoes – that if He really wants to be a success, Jerusalem is the place to put on a show. His brothers seem to have accepted that He is some kind of powerful prophet – but note what our text says: *“For not even his brothers believed in him.”* Meaning that even they, those closest to Him, did not really believe His claim to have descended from heaven, to be the Son of God. And Jesus rejects their muttering against Him, their insistence that He go after worldly acclaim.

Scene Two, verses ten through thirteen. After His brothers leave for the feast, Jesus does go as well – but privately, so as not to stir up a crowd. The Jewish leadership, like the brothers, can't believe He would pass up the opportunity to play to the crowds at the Feast, and so are actively searching everywhere and asking everyone, *“Where is He? Have you seen Him?”* Which gets the crowd muttering. Verse twelve: *“And there was much muttering about him among the people. While some said, ‘He is a good man,’ others said, ‘No, he is leading the people astray.’”* Notice that neither group has got it right – for while Jesus is most certainly not leading the people astray, neither is He merely “a good man.”

Scene Three, verses fourteen through twenty-four. Halfway through the weeklong Feast, Jesus suddenly appears openly in the Temple and begins teaching the people. The Jewish leadership is astonished at the depth and breadth of His wisdom, because He has never graduated from one of their official and approved Jewish Teacher Schools. Jesus tells the crowds that His teaching is authoritative not because of human approval, not even because He is speaking on His own authority. He tells them His teaching is true, and is to be accepted because He is reporting the very Words God has spoken in Heaven, from whence He has come. And oh, this really sends the crowd and the religious leaders into a frenzy of muttering and disapproval.

But Jesus responds with two challenges to them. First, that even though they accept that Moses' teaching had authority from God, they don't obey what Moses taught them – for example, the Ten Commandments Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai during the wilderness wandering. And second, a specific example of that, having to do with the Sabbath command. The religious leaders want to arrest Jesus because earlier, remember, He had healed a man on the Sabbath – which the religious leaders took to be a willful and sinful violation of the Sabbath command. Jesus then shows them how flawed their understanding of the Sabbath command is if they think making a man whole on the Sabbath is somehow wrong.

Scene Four, verses twenty-five through thirty-one – more muttering against Jesus. Some in the crowd can't believe that the religious authorities are letting Jesus teach openly in the Temple, implying that – conspiracy theory alert – that maybe the religious leaders actually know that Jesus really is the Messiah, the Son of God. Others chime in, *“No way – He's from Galilee (a); and (b), when the Messiah comes we won't know where he comes from.”* Which was a belief based on, well, nothing Biblical. This prompts Jesus to respond to this round of muttering by turning it back on them. He tells them that if they knew the One who sent Him, the Father in heaven, then they would truly know where Jesus has come from. But because they clearly don't know the Father, that is why they don't recognize the Son. Which further divides the crowd and dials up the muttering. Some are ready to accept Him on the spot; others are not so sure. They mutter, *“Well, He is doing a lot of Messiah-type things, but how can we be sure that He is the Messiah?”*

So, four scenes of muttering about Jesus at the Feast of Booths, just as Israel in the wilderness, while living in booths, had muttered against God. Muttering against Jesus, refusing to believe in Jesus – mainly because Jesus is not meeting **their** expectations of who He should be and what He ought to be doing. Just as Israel had muttered and refused to believe and obey in the wilderness because they too felt God was not being God the way they wanted Him to be.

And what does any of this have to do with us this morning? Well, let's be honest with ourselves and with God for just a moment. Isn't one of the biggest reasons we keep Jesus at arm's length from our lives, sometimes even walking away from Him altogether – isn't it because He often won't do the things that we want Him to do, and in the time and manner we demand of Him? Because He won't give us the things we want when we want them? And because what He asks of us is, to us, unreasonable, extreme, and impractical? We, just like Israel in the wilderness, and just like the crowd that day in Jerusalem, muttering against Him, turning from Him because He didn't answer our prayers the way we told Him to, didn't do for us immediately the thing we demanded of Him, didn't give success to our causes and victory to our team like He should have? Just like Israel in the wilderness, just like the crowd in Jerusalem for the Feast of Booths, muttering against

Him, turning away from Him, refusing to let Him be our Lord and Savior truly, deeply, and completely simply because He just simply refuses to be Lord and Savior on our terms. Because He keeps insisting that we learn how to pray, *“Not my will, but Thine.”*⁶

So, what these first four scenes reveal about us is that not much has changed in the human heart since our first rebellion against God back in the Garden of Eden – which was occasioned, remember, by a case of Adam and Eve muttering that God did not have their best interests at heart and that they should instead do things their way, not His.⁷ But what these first four scenes also reveal is the truth that God will never give in to our muttering – the truth that Jesus fully intends on continuing to be our Lord and Savior in His way, on His terms, no matter how much we mutter against Him. And so the fifth scene follows from this, highlights this, puts before us the fact that true faith begins in us only once we have finally given in and truly surrendered ourselves to Him. Only when we at last are willing to let God be God in our lives the way He wants to be. For only once we have done this can His promised gift of eternal life, abundant life, His life take root in us, blossom and grow in us, become a harvest festival of the soul in us. Only once we have decided to let Jesus be Jesus in our lives come what may do we begin to enter into the life of that greater Promised Land – the life of the Kingdom of heaven. Only once we have chosen to let God be God in our lives as He desires to be, not as we wish Him to be.

Again, that’s what the Fifth Scene, verses thirty-two through thirty-six, is pointing us toward, that decision – the importance of that decision, as well as the urgency of that decision. Remember again Moses and Joshua both warning Israel in the wilderness, on the edge of the Promised Land, that if they truly want to know life in the Promised Land, then they must make a decision, and soon, to let God be God, to choose God be their God. In this fifth scene, Jesus basically issues the same warning – but with much greater consequence, for it is God Himself speaking the warning this time. The Pharisees and chief priests have heard enough – they decide to try to get rid of Him once and for all. But Jesus tells them, *“I will be with you a little longer; and then I am going to him who sent me. You will seek me and you will not find me.”* In other words, there is a time factor in the struggle for our soul. It really can become too late to stop our muttering and to choose life, to choose Him.

God, speaking through His prophet Isaiah: *“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.”*⁸ God, speaking through His prophet Paul: *“Behold, now is the time, behold, now is the day of salvation.”*⁹ And God, speaking through His Son, our Lord and Savior: *“I will be with you a little longer; and then I am going to him who sent me.”* Meaning then comes a time when it will be too late. But why, why would any human being ever want to wait until it is too late when it is life – abundant life here and eternal life in the Kingdom to come – life which is what is at stake?

Heather Kopp had long thought of herself as a Christian, as a sinner saved by grace – but it was only when the life she had chosen and built for herself completely fell apart that she began to understand what those words, what that commitment, really means:

*Up until that day when I fell on my knees and sobbed beside
my bed, God’s grace had been a nice option, a convenient option,
but not my only option . . . It was a painful epiphany with enormous*

implications. Among other things, it meant that if I was ever going to experience the kind of ongoing spiritual transformation I so desperately wanted, I would have to learn the difference between ascribing to a set of Christian beliefs that had no power to change me, and clinging daily to an experience of God's love and grace that could.¹⁰

We can mutter all we want against the God who refuses to be God the way we want Him to be. And so basically, despite all outward appearances, keep Him at arm's length from our heart of hearts. Or we can do the only sensible thing, the only life-giving, life-changing, life eternal and life abundant thing and choose to let God be God – in us and for us and with us, in all times and in all circumstances and in the deepest possible of ways – to let God be God in us now and forever.

Or, as Moses put it to Israel that day in the wilderness when they all still dwelt in booths: *"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days . . ."*¹¹

¹ Leviticus 23:33-43.

² John 7:37.

³ Leviticus 23:42-43.

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:15-18.

⁵ Joshua 24:15.

⁶ Matthew 26:39. But also the Lord's Prayer: *"Thy Kingdom come, **Thy** will be done"* (Matt. 6:10).

⁷ Genesis 3:1-7.

⁸ Isaiah 55:6.

⁹ II Corinthians 6:2.

¹⁰ Heather Kopp, *Sober Mercies*, quoted in David Zahl, *The Big Relief: The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2025), p. 71.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 30:19-20.