“***Rivers of Living Water***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Nov. 17, 2019

**Isaiah 12:1–4**

1I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me,  
your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4And you will say on that day:  
Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name;  
make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

**John 7:37–39**

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, 38and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” 39Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

This is an easy passage in one way, and a difficult one in another sense. The basic spiritual meaning seems clear: Jesus pours the Spirit upon believers; and the Spirit bubbles up within us as living energy and joy. This giving of life is the whole of Jesus’ work, and the Spirit continues his work. What is difficult to figure out is which Old Testament Scripture the Gospel is referring to when it says “out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38). There is no Bible passage that says that, exactly. Some people point to Isa 58:11: “you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail,” and that looks promising, but the emphasis in that chapter is on charity and sharing—*not* the emphasis in John 7. The stress in Isaiah 12 is on salvation, which fits better with Jesus’ remarks.

The line in Isaiah 12, “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (12:3), *could* be remembered, off the top of one’s head, as “out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” It’s either a slight distortion, or possibly a mixing of the two Isaiah passages. Was it a fluid or mixed quotation, or should we call it a misquote, and if so, did Jesus make a mistake, or did John? Or should we even call it a mistake? Maybe it is perfectly fine that the Gospel is only in the ballpark with a quotation. Does it matter if the Old Testament does not say exactly what it is alleged to have said? Is that crucial? After all, what really matters to us is that the Messiah sets out to save believers, drenches them with the Spirit, and thus changes people’s lives. Yet it is intriguing that either Jesus or John is fuzzy in recalling a Scripture or two.

Do we need the Bible to be absolutely and perfectly accurate down to the last syllable, or can we be satisfied with learning about spiritual truth that changes our lives? Can we endure some uncertainty, even some slight imperfection, in the Bible? That would not mean that the infinite God is imperfect. But it *would* mean that the humanly transmitted Bible is less than fully clear, and might even have flaws in it. But then, everything that is touched by human hands is flawed—including the church, for instance. The church can be *highly* flawed.

I think you have to decide what to think about this. Does the Bible have to be perfect? You have the power to come to terms with this. You are the interpreter of everything you hear and read, and you have your own way of appropriating truth.

After all, how do we get truth? Isn’t truth transmitted to us down the river of time? And what happens to things that travel down a river? They get reshaped. So truth gets shaped by the things it runs into in the course of traveling down the river of time. Isaiah 12 tends to take on new meaning as it travels through time.

In fact, Isaiah 12 does not actually contain the idea of “rivers.” It is Jesus who brings in the image of rivers. Isaiah 12 speaks of “wells of salvation,” while the picture in Isaiah 58 is of a “spring of water,” but Jesus speaks of “rivers of living water” gushing up, flowing from the believer’s heart. This is to stress how the Spirit flows *out* of our hearts once it has gotten *into* them. He emphasizes how the transformed believer becomes a center and *source* of living water. So he has taken the truths in Isaiah 12 and possibly in Isaiah 58, and added to them.

How about us? Are we allowed to add to the truths we receive? I think so, with some caution and a lot of humility. A sermon adds to the truths received, or reshapes them for appropriation in the present day. I, too, am standing in the river, receiving something from upstream and then handing it on. And when you hand the truth on, it will be flavored and shaped by your experience and your personality. It is *alright* that we imperfect beings handle something as precious and explosive as truth. Jesus knew his imperfect apostles were going to hand on his message, and that it would be shaped by each apostle’s experience and memory. He said the Spirit would “remind” them of what he had said (John 14:26), but I think the differences in the Gospels show us that their memories were not perfect.

We are like the apostles, in a way. Of course, we want to be as accurate and as respectful as possible, when handing something on. We are not to become bloated or self-important about it. We are not to boast. The message is not about us. We are not to pollute the water that passes through our hands.

But here is a stunning thought: whenever you utter some principle from your faith, like “I believe love will triumph in the end,” or “God helps us all,” you are depositing something into the river of living truth that flows down through time. You received something, it changed you, and now you are passing it on. It’s like a blessed game of telephone. Pass it on, though you can’t help but change it a little. Whenever you pay it forward, whenever you keep the faith, whenever you say “God is good,” you are helping to contribute to the river of truth. We’re standing in this river anyway; we might as well recognize that we play a role in transmitting truth down through time. It’s humbling and exciting when you think that rivers of truth are flowing through you and through me. Let’s get wet! Let’s share the living waters, the waters of salvation that the prophets anticipated, and that Jesus revealed.