

Sermon "Broken Wells and Eternal Springs"  
Kirk St James  
Sunday August 31, 2025  
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While I was home in Nova Scotia the last couple weeks there was a lot of talk about rain. Concerns about wells going dry, forest fires, and conservation methods. Mom lives at the end of a dirt road surrounded by trees, many of which came down during hurricane Fiona—it is essentially a tinder box, and there was nothing that we could do to help improve conditions. While there are many things we can do in this world we cannot make it rain. That reality also comes with a sense of helplessness, as firefighters battle the wildfire in Annapolis, crops sit dry in the fields, and things wither and brown. It hits home just how important water is for life and well being.

The importance of water is an important theme in our scripture reading today as well. In the ancient world water was a critical resource. “Nothing could be of greater value in the geography of Jerusalem than fresh water. To refer to the Lord as a “fountain of living water” is instantly to communicate value almost beyond measure. Water is literally a source of life. The prophet suggests that the Lord is the source of living water for Israel. To choose the Lord is to choose that which endures, renews, gives of itself,” literally the opposite of what the Israelites have chosen to do. On one hand it seems unfathomable that someone who is dying of thirst would refuse to reach out and drink the water that is freely offered—but sometimes humanity can be that stubborn. God is watching God’s people, utterly frustrated by their actions so in Jeremiah today they are called to account.

The Israelites have willingly wandered away from their faith so, God calls them out on their faithlessness. The question is whether or not the people can recognize the truth in this accusation and see how deeply they are hurting themselves and others. So often it is easy to see the mistakes of others and how they have done things wrong. For example, how many times do we find ourselves yelling at our favorite characters in a television show or movie that are clearly making the wrong decision? How many times do we tell them “Don’t go down that hallway” “don’t say those words” and many other

words of advice? How many times have we shouted “if you hit that puck two inches to the left it would have been a goal—how could they miss that shot!” Yet when we look at our lives it is more difficult to see where we are wrong. Sometimes I think marriage is a great way to discover your partners' faults while simultaneously confirming everything you yourself know to be right. I am quick to point out to Chad when something is not hung back up in the closet, yet surprisingly blind when I leave a dish out on the counter!

The words of God to his people are powerful, uncomfortable, and unfortunately true. God's words of reprimand toward his people need to be understood in light of the covenant that was formed between God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Covenants were common in the ancient world. They were formed when several parties were bound together by a web of mutual promises. While God has been keeping up his end of the bargain, Israel has completely defaulted on its obligations. The Sinai covenant also known as the Mosaic covenant was formed between God and his people after their freedom from slavery in Egypt. This covenant closely resembled other treaties and agreements in the ancient world with a few notable exceptions. In these agreements and covenants (in general) the King/Lord would pledge to provide benevolent rule and protection to conquered people in exchange for their loyalty. The basic features of these agreements (which can also be seen in the Mosaic Covenant) are: 1) A historical prologue that reviews the past relationship between the parties. 2) A statement of obligations the parties now have to one another. 3) Provisions for occasionally reading the treaty in public so people remembered their obligations and 4) a list of blessings and curses in case the treaty were to be broken. God's covenant with his people included all of these elements, but there are some additional features that are much more important.

The Mosaic Covenant was not brought about by an act of conquest, but rather by God's deliverance of Israel from slavery. Secondly, and I would argue even more importantly is that this agreement between God and his people was not established simply as an agreement between a

Lord/King and his vassals. Rather, this agreement was founded on an intimate relationship based on love. God did not lay out his covenant to merely keep his people in line. He did not do it so that he could be King and they, his slaves. God entered into this covenant because he loved his people and wanted them to flourish in their lives, and in this new land that was promised to them. Yet here we are in the Promised Land where God has blessed them continually, where he has always, ALWAYS kept up his end of the covenant and people do not care. That type of rejection can feel personnel. After everything God has done for them how can they walk away?

It sounds a bit like the story of Hosea that we read a few weeks ago. Hosea marries a woman he loves and cares for but, she keeps running away. Yet his love for her is so great and so deep he keeps saving her because he does not want to see her hurt. Hosea cares for her and he is hurt deeply when she continually rejects his help. We hear a bit of this in God's accusations against his people in this passage. For example "What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?...I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination...the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit...for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water."

In other words "I took you out of suffering and slavery. I led you to a land where you had all the food, all the water, and all the things you needed to live and thrive. I have kept my promises to you and despite all of this you have not only walked away from me; you have corrupted the gifts I gave you." This sums up the entire narrative. Not only should God be angry but, those blessings and curses of the covenant need to be considered enacted. Yet despite his anger God is heartbroken over his people. You really have to believe after all the Israelites have been through and all of their experiences

of God that trusting and following in him when they enter the Promised Land should be easy. I wonder sometimes if that is where we tend to get hung up?

I don't know about you but I am the best Christian when I am going through difficulty, and I am the worst Christian when things are going along steady. When we hit rough times prayer seems more important, and our thoughts seem to become more focused. How many times has something bad happened and we pray something along the lines of "God if you will just get me through this I will pray every day and read my Bible, I promise just get me through this." Then the week after life settles down and things resolve we forget those promises or, perhaps more likely they fade now that the immediate concern has calmed down. Let's be honest—we have likely all been here.

We have all dug our own cisterns that are cracked and hold no water, yet we try anyway. This passage in Jeremiah demonstrates God's deep love and also frustration with his people. It outlines how he has cared for them, and how they have turned from Him. Our lives might not be quite as dramatic as the Israelites but we all have ways that we turn away. We see the piece of dust in our neighbour's eye and forget about the plank in our own. This passage is an important reminder that we need to be aware of what we say and do. Do our actions and our words as Christians line up in our life? Are there areas in our lives where we "forget" (either on purpose or by chance) what God has called us to do?

It is easy to be careless with the promises of God. Esau proved that when he traded away his birthright for a bowl of porridge when he was hungry. The Israelites had everything they needed to thrive in the Promised Land, yet over time it is easy to forget. One of my commentaries asked an important question as it was concluding, it said "The idolatry that Jeremiah indicates is focused less on false objects than on false hopes. In turn, these false hopes are based on forgetfulness. We have forgotten the stories of what God has done. We do not hear God's poignant plea to remember the history of divine grace we have inherited. We are lured by the new because we have forgotten the power and wonder of the past. For that forgetfulness we stand, along with ancient Judah, as those

hearing the covenant lawsuit fully indicted.” As we go from here today may we take some time to examine our lives and the areas we may have strayed—examine the cracked cisterns we have tried to build. Even if we find ourselves the owner of a broken cistern, God promises us that when we turn back, we will once again find the well that will never run dry.

