

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Thirsty

(John 4; John 7; Jeremiah 2)

Introduction: Weather or not...

As some of you who know me well know, I am pathologically interested in weather.

Weather fascinates me. Part of last week's weather fascination included a brief time when it was warmer in Holsby, Sweden than it was in San Antonio, Texas. A truly unusual moment.

As well, I was sad to have missed the weather event of last week's torrential downpours.

I do miss seeing a good storm, especially given our long-term drought. Which brings me to weather...and rain.

For all kinds of good reasons, water is always a hot topic in this city.

In years when we receive limited rainfall, our city leaders impose sometimes pretty restrictions on water use.

But we submit to the restrictions and agree to pay more for the water we get because we need water. Water is life.

It is true of water more than any other natural resource. We need water. People and civilizations follow water.

The settling of North America followed waterways for drinking, agriculture, transportation, cooking, and hygiene.

San Antonio was settled because of the San Pedro Springs and the San Antonio River and Salado and Leon and Culebra Creeks.

The presence of the gigantic Edwards Underground Aquifer has allowed the continued growth of San Antonio.

Rivers and lakes and aquifers are crucial to sustain a population. We need the provision of water to survive and thrive.

So, given how important water is for our *physical* needs, we aren't at all surprised to find that the Bible very often uses water to picture God's provision for our deepest *personal* needs.

When King David wrote about his desire for God, he used the image of water to get the idea across.

***[Psalm 42:1] As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for You, O God.***

That's a picture of great thirst. When there is a water shortage, the deer looking for water brooks is in trouble. And farmers and ranchers (and gardeners) and all of us in San Antonio are in trouble.

And when there isn't enough water you can only do so many things to compensate. You can...
...conserve and use less water.
...pipe or truck it in - as we do, from the Bryan / College Station area - which is very expensive.
...desalinate sea water if you live near the coast - which is, again, very expensive.
...dig a well that taps into water underground.

There is one other way to deal with a lack of water we'll see in a bit.

This “other way” pictures what Christians are tempted to do when they are “thirsty” (there’s King David’s word, again) for what only God can provide.

Before turning to that “other way” though, let’s think for a bit about our thirsts in life. Our desires and longings.

THIRSTS / LONGINGS

1 - Thirsts / Longings are from God and are a good part of being human

We are all made in the image and likeness of God, who Himself has longings and desires. He longs for us to grow in holiness and for us to obey Him - so, it is not a bad thing that we desire.

It’s OK to be thirsty.

However, our thirsts and desires and appetites in life - since Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden - are related to BOTH our God-designed humanity AND to our fallenness.

So, our desires can be problems. The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:19 of people whose ***“god is their appetite / belly / desire.”*** It isn’t good to worship life’s appetites. We would call that an “addiction.”

So...
...we are human and, therefore, have thirsts.
...and we are sinful and, therefore are tempted to seek the satisfaction of our thirsts - even in inappropriate, sinful ways.

Hold that thought. I want us to see that Jesus takes our “thirsts” very seriously.

2 - Jesus promises to satisfy our thirsts / longings

John 4

One day, He and His disciples entered the region of Samaria.

He sent those disciples into a nearby village - Sychar - to buy food while He stayed by Jacob’s Well.

In the heat of the day, Jesus was joined at the well by a woman who came to draw water.

She came to the well because she was thirsty. Of course.

And why was the woman there at the well in the middle of the day?

Well, for reasons that the story makes clear, this woman had been cut off from the other women of the city who came to the well in the cool of the morning.

While she was drawing water for herself, Jesus asked her to draw water for Him from the well.

She expressed surprise that a Jewish man would speak to a Samaritan woman at all.

After all, Samaritans and Jews didn’t have much to do with each other and didn’t get along with each other.

Then, there was some conversation. He told her that...
...IF she knew about the gift of God, and
...IF she knew who it was Who was asking her to draw water for Him,
...THEN she would have asked Him and He would have given her ***“living water.”***

This is a fantastic story, and I’d love to keep going through this story.

But, for our purposes this morning, I just want us to see what Jesus had to say about this woman’s thirsts.

He...

...recognized that she was thirsty - and not just for water.
...affirmed her thirst.

...told her that He knew that she had been seeking to satisfy those deep, personal thirsts for a long time in some unhealthy, desperate ways.

But notice what Jesus didn't do: He didn't rebuke her for her thirsts.

Instead, He pointed to Himself and told her that He was the only One who could satisfy her deepest thirsts and longings.

He would give her **"living water"** (and by that He meant LIFE - eternal life) if she would believe in Him.

In another scene, a couple of chapters over, we see Jesus in Jerusalem, on the last day of the annual Feast of Tabernacles.

John 7

He said to a crowd of people, **"If anyone is thirsty..."** - and of course we are all thirsty. But how did He end that sentence?

He didn't say...
 ...stop being so thirsty!
 ...repent of your thirst!
 ...bury your longings and desires!

No. Jesus invited thirsty people, **"Come to Me and drink."**

What will happen if we **"come to Him"** - when we believe in Him?

Jesus will satisfy our thirsts so that from our **"innermost being will flow rivers of living water."**

The thirst that Jesus will satisfy is the thirst for LIFE (life with God; eternal life; life with meaning and purpose) when someone believes in Him for that LIFE.

Like the Samaritan woman and the crowd in Jerusalem, we all have thirsts, longings, and desires.

3 - Taking a look at our thirsts / longings / desires

We have biological and physical, material thirsts, including...

Health
 Roof over our head
 Food on the table
 Clothes (stylish; fits)
 Intimacy and sexual fulfillment
 Meaningful work

And creature comforts like money in the bank and car that runs (maybe even fast. 😊)

And toys - a big flat screen, maybe a boat, the latest gear for whatever hobbies we enjoy.

And we have social and relational thirsts.

Friendships that work
 Marriages that are fulfilling
 Intergenerational relationships
 Between younger, peers, and older
 With children and grandchildren and parents and grandparents
 We want to fit in, socially.

We all have these thirsts - and more besides.

And - at any given moment, any of these can be very intense longings / thirsts, even desperate.

It is normal / human to thirst for pleasant circumstances and healthy relationships.

But - and this is critical - Jesus doesn't promise the kind of fulfillment we long for in these arenas, here and now.

In fact, Jesus promised that in this world we will have tribulation, hardship, suffering, and loss.

In this world all thirsts won't be quenched, all desires won't be satisfied.

We're living in a broken world in which famines and droughts and fires and floods and hurricanes and storms and earthquakes happen.

Loved ones die; sicknesses hit; accidents happen; we lose jobs; economies rise and fall; wars rage.

And even when it comes to those things that He does promise - His abiding presence, peace, joy, purpose and meaning in life - these graces may not be apparent to the degree we wish they would at all times, given the ups and downs of our lives and of our world.

We will inevitably have unmet longings / thirsts / desires in life.

Having said that, if you're tracking with me, we're starting to see what life is going to often "feel" like. It's going to hurt.

What is a maturing Christian like on the inside? What does spiritual maturity feel like?

Well, even when we're walking with Jesus, life is still going to hurt because of unmet longings / unquenched thirsts.

If you want to push back against the idea that walking with Jesus won't take away all unmet longings and unquenched thirsts, consider...Jesus.

4 - What does spiritual maturity feel like?

a. Spiritual maturity does not equate to feeling good.

****The world is broken, so life won't always feel good.*

...Jesus was referred to as "**a man of pain (or "sorrows"** Isaiah 53) - and I don't think that this was just a comment on Jesus' experience on the cross.

It was a reference to the sorrow He experienced regularly because He - of all people - knew what God had intended when He created people and the world we live in.

Knowing what God had made, everywhere He looked He saw, not fulness and joy and peace - but a wreck.

The wreck of this world wrecked Him. He walked through life in pain over the wreckage we all live in and the wrecks we all are.

You and I can't avoid unavoidable pain and struggle.

We, too, understand how things "*should be.*" And when we compare THAT to how things "*are*" it makes the present all the more ugly - and painful.

Do we have a promise that God will give us the comforts of health, leisure, prosperity, satisfying relationships, here and now, in fullest measure?

NO.

Yes, Jesus has given us the gift of eternal life which is always a source of joy and gratitude. That doesn't mean that we will always "feel" good.

We have got to get rid of the idea that the Christian life is pain-free.

****Heaven is not now*

The message that we can experience heaven NOW is the lie we have to let go if the internal transformation into the likeness of Jesus that is possible now is to occur.

The promise we'll sometimes hear is that Christianity offers the complete satisfaction of all of my thirsts NOW.

But that is not a biblical way to look at life.

Yes, all thirsts will be quenched, one day. But not here and not now. Here, there is always something wrong with everything.

So, yes, it is perfectly normal, human, even godly, to hurt. It is OK to hurt.

But...what happens when we grow weary of the pain of living with unmet thirsts and desires?

What happens when we hurt for so long or we hurt so badly is that we are tempted to stop that, and sometimes, in any way possible.

The Bible takes on the question of God's people seeking to dull the unavoidable ache of this life, and he uses the image of water scarcity to answer it.

We are tempted to dig cisterns.

5 - Cisterns

A cistern would be exactly what you need in the middle of a drought. The kind of drought we have experienced over the last five years (last week's rains notwithstanding...)

In the middle of a drought, digging a cistern makes great sense.

Digging a cistern if you live on the banks of a reliable stream is nutty. But farmers and ranchers in Texas resort to above-ground water tanks and underground cisterns to provide water in times of drought.

Typically, a cistern is a pit dug in hard clay or cut out of the rock.

During rainy seasons, the cistern owner diverts rainwater into the cistern. It is then covered to keep the water from evaporating when the drought comes.

It is hard work to dig a cistern. Sometimes it takes years to cut through the rock and make a cistern large enough to be useful.

But cistern-digging was - and is - common in many places today, and throughout history.

The practice of cistern-digging makes settlement possible in many other parts of the world where there isn't reliable water.

So, cisterns aren't a bad thing. But they do have their downsides...

One modern observer of the cisterns of the Middle East has written that the water collected in cisterns has "*the color of weak soapsuds, the taste of the earth or the stable and is full of worms.*"

Yummy. But taste and appearance and worms aren't the worst thing about cisterns. The worst part is...they leak.

That means that in a time of great need, in the middle of a drought, the cistern owner goes out to his cistern to draw water for his family - and finds that it's bone dry.

Cisterns fail.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah accused the Jews of his day of digging "spiritual" cisterns.

6 - The temptation to dig spiritual cisterns (Jeremiah 2)

Old Testament Jews

***[Jeremiah 2:13] For My people have committed two evils:
They have abandoned Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To carve out for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That do not hold water.***

God claimed to be an unquenchable resource for His people. He was a constantly reliable source of sustenance and refreshment to their souls.

What His people needed, He would provide.
 Protection and security from enemies? Got it.
 Bountiful harvests? Got it.
 A transcendent purpose and meaning in life? Got it.

God was ***“The fountain of living waters.”***

The Jews of Jeremiah’s day knew all that the Lord was offering - and he said that they *“abandoned Him.”* They weren’t interested and walked away.

The Jews Jeremiah was speaking to knew exactly what he was talking about: Egypt and Assyria.

The Jews turned to these two nations instead of to God to find security and meaning and LIFE!

Access to God’s ***“living waters”*** would have required that they follow Him, depend on Him. And it was THAT that they refused to do.

So...
 FIRST, they walked away from God’s refreshing streams.
 SECOND, they settled for a way less satisfying and far less reliable water.

When the Lord accused His people of digging cisterns, He wasn’t thinking of literal holes in the ground.

He had in mind their habit of turning to the nations around them for protection and provision. Those alliances always turned out to be very leaky cisterns.

Every time Israel put her confidence in something or someone other than the Lord, she ended up disappointed, humiliated, and defeated. They leaked every time.

But, lest we beat up on the Jews too much, the people of God have always tended to be incurable cistern diggers.

We who believe in Jesus are often guilty of looking for LIFE in all kinds of people, places, and things other than Jesus.

Christians

We work hard to dig those cisterns. We spend years pounding through the rock to get them good and deep.

We’re proud of the holes we’ve dug. And if the water tastes a little bit like dirt, looks a lot like soapsuds, and has earthworms swimming around in it, at least we can say that we dug the hole. *“That’s MY cistern!”*

Being thirsty people, we’re just like ancient Israel. We try to provide for ourselves waters that, while wet, are neither satisfying nor reliable.

Some cisterns are obviously destructive: drugs, abuse of alcohol, Internet porn, other sexual sins, addictive gaming or gambling.

They consume lives - and they leak.

But cisterns can be respectable and wholesome looking, too.

The good enjoyment of friends and family, exercise, and productive work can all end up taking the place that only God should have in a life.

As we wrap up, I’ll speak about cisterns in my own life. I’ll mention one that is an on-going challenge, and one that I dealt with years ago.

Speaking personally...

#1 - Music - Record-breaking party in my youth

Filling up this cistern from my late teen-aged years meant stopping a behavior.

As it was and is for lots of young people, music was an important part of my life. A big part. I had become a Christian and I was growing in my faith. And I loved music - rock music.

Please know that I'm not knocking music or even any particular kind of music. But in my life at that time, music had become something I found myself retreating to in order to find LIFE.

I was absorbed in it. And in a moment of reflection, I realized that my spiritual development was slowing because I was so obsessed with my music.

It had become a cistern. I was finding "LIFE" in music.

So, one day I filled in my cistern and had a record-breaking party.

I took all of my vinyl outside, got out a hammer, and smashed those records to bits.
(I used to have a picture of me sitting on the pile of broken records, but I haven't been able to find it.)

Breaking those records was a milestone in my walk with Jesus and was a hard reset in what was, for me, an unhealthy relationship with music.

Another cistern has proven to be more difficult to walk away from.

#2 - Addiction to crowds

As you know, I have served as a pastor for a long time. Over the years, I have paid attention to the warnings people give pastors.

- Watch out for the sin of pride. (a warning that actually feeds pride, as if being a pastor is something to be proud of...)
- Don't fall for the temptation of sexual sin.
- Beware the lure of greed and excess, even robbing the church of money.

All of these are helpful warnings, and pastors have always been warned about them.

But a few generations ago, when pastors were warned about cisterns, they would add a fourth possibility that we may not think about today:

Beware of crowds.

And I get it. There is something about a full room that can seem like LIFE to a pastor.

Of course, we pastors want our churches to grow because
people need Jesus
a bigger church can do more good.
Etc...

Yep, all true...AND there can easily be cistern-digging mixed in with a pastor's desire for a full room. We pastors can find life in a full room.

I'm not thankful for much of Covid-19.

But I can say that Covid-19 taught me invaluable lessons about my "cistern" of finding life from a crowd.

During Covid, some of you will remember that we had "crowds" of 6-10 people in worship services at 11:00am.

Even today, I can identify when I'm digging a "crowd cistern."

...when I feel "low" on a Sunday when I wish those who weren't there had showed up.

OR

...when I get super excited on a Sunday when more people are present.

My goal is to be at a place - spiritually speaking - where the size of the group is irrelevant and I'm focused on simply serving anyone present.

I am currently working hard to fill in the “crowd” cistern by:

- Praying that God would open my eyes to a few individuals to connect with every Sunday.
- Thanking God for every person who is present - and focusing on them.
- Praying for great blessing for those who are not present.

Conclusion:

You’ve heard a bit of my story and how much work I still have to do to stop trying to find LIFE in things other than Jesus.

I’ll end with two “asks” of each of you today, straight from Jeremiah 2 and John 4 and John 7.

- Would you be willing to reflect on your life and see if you can identify a cistern (or two) you have dug to dull the ache of unmet longings / thirsts?
- Would you agree to look for ways to abandon / fill in that cistern and to simply live with the pain of an unsatisfied thirst, believing that living with the pain...
 - ...will help you know the Lord better?
 - ...is putting yourself on a path toward becoming more like your Savior, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, who loved really well?