

Drinking Sand

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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John 4:1-15

When Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was making and baptizing more disciples than John — though Jesus himself wasn't baptizing, his disciples were — he left Judea and went back to Galilee.

Now, he had to travel through Samaria. And he came to the Samaritan town called Sychar, near the place that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. And Jesus sat down by the well, tired out from the journey. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (Jews don't associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." She said to him, "Sir, you don't have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do you get this living water from? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, along with his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again. But whoever drinks the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I will give them will be in them a well that springs up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so I won't be thirsty and won't have to keep coming here for water."

Our World Belongs to God 15

Fallen with our first parents,
we prove each day
that apart from grace
we are guilty sinners:
 we fail to thank God,
 we break God's laws,
 we ignore our tasks.

Looking for life without God, we find death;
grasping for freedom outside the law,
 we trap ourselves in Satan's snares;
pursuing pleasure, we lose the gift of joy.

Children's Story

Last Thursday Sammy the Squirrel, Chester the Chipmunk, and Wally the Woodchuck went for a hike in the Great Forest. They pretended to be explorers. They had come to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no rodent had gone before.

They hiked deep into the forest, and in no time they were lost. They hiked some more, pretending to look for new life and new civilizations. But really they were looking for the way home.

When Sammy and his friends came upon a quickly flowing stream, they turned left and followed it. They were sure it would lead them home.

That's when Chester said, "I'm hungry." That's when Wally said, "Me too. And I'm thirsty."

Actually all three of them were thirsty. So, as they walked alongside the stream, they looked for water.

They looked under rocks. No water there. They looked behind bushes. No water there. They looked in tree tops. No water there either.

So they walked and they walked — what else could they do? — they walked alongside the stream, hungry and thirsty — so thirsty! — all the way home.

I wonder why they never found any water to drink.

Sermon

In the mid-1990s Neal Plantinga, who is now the president of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, wrote an award-winning book about sin. Here's how he begins:

The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it. Some of our grandparents agonized over their sins. A man who lost his temper might wonder whether he could still go to Holy Communion. A woman who for years envied her more attractive and intelligent sister might worry that this sin threatened her very salvation. But the shadow has dimmed. Nowadays, the accusation *you have sinned* is often said with a grin, and with a tone that signals an inside joke (Cornelius Plantinga, Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995; p. ix).

I had hoped that today's sermon would take a broad look at sin, that it would consider the multifaceted biblical presentation of sin. To quote Plantinga again,

The Bible presents sin . . . in an array of images: sin is the missing of a target, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart and a stiff neck. Sin is blindness and deafness. It is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it — both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin, people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images suggest deviance: even when it is familiar, sin is never normal. Sin is disruption of created harmony and then resistance to divine restoration of that harmony. Above all, sin disrupts and resists the vital human relation to God . . . (p. 5).

I had hoped that today's sermon would consider this multifaceted biblical presentation of sin and that it would consider sin in the larger context of creation and redemption. Sin, after all, is only part of the story. And, though sin usually winds up as the focus of books and movies, it's not the best part of the story.

That was my hope for today's sermon, but I've brought that hope back down to size. I'll try to keep some, at least, of the broader context in mind. But I think I'll wind up saying just a little about sin. Of course, we all have sinned enough and been sinned against enough to be able to add some meat to the few bones I serve up today.

One thing I conclude about sin — from biblical images and texts and from reflection on those biblical materials, as in the Contemporary Testimony — one thing I conclude is that sin has a poor sense of direction. Sin tends to look for life in the wrong places.

Steve is a thirty-nine year old investment banker. For four months now he's been sabotaging his second marriage with his third extra-marital affair. He's never going to find the dream he's chasing. He's never going to find the life he imagines. He's going in the wrong direction. Deep down he knows that, even if he doesn't know which way to turn instead.

Sarah is a clinical psychologist and a deacon in her church. She's also a glutton. Hungry for love, she comes home each night and communes deeply with two, sometimes three, platefuls of food, with two, sometimes three, glasses of wine, and with two, usually three, Godiva chocolates. Looking for life, she finds ill-health. Looking for love, she finds self-loathing. But she doesn't know where to turn instead.

Sin has a poor sense of direction.

That's why sin winds up drinking sand. Listen to Jeremiah: "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" (2:13).

We take water for granted. It flows from our faucets. It fills our fountains. It falls from our shelves in clear plastic bottles. But water is life. And where water is scarce or uncertain, it's precious. No wonder people dig out cisterns, large water storage pits, to ensure a stable supply of water, storing up rainfall and run-off in defiance of death-dealing summer days.

But what if the cistern is cracked? What if new-caught raindrops seep away within a handful of days? What if you dig another cistern, and the same thing happens? And another? And another? What if there's nothing to drink but the damp sand at the bottom of the cistern? What good will that "mineral water" do?

That's the picture Jeremiah sketches. And here's the folly of it: there is a source of water available. Not stored up as a hedge against the dry season, but flowing and fresh and sufficient (if not always abundant). There's no need to look for water from a cistern, cracked or not, when water is gushing from a rock, when there's a "fountain of living water."

But sin doesn't see that. Sin can't see that. Sin won't see that. Sin has a poor sense of direction. Sin winds up drinking sand. We wind up drinking sand.

To switch metaphors, drinking the blood of the victims of our greed and lust, of our anger and envy, and of our other sins, doesn't satisfy our thirst at all. It leaves us thirstier than ever. It's like drinking sand.

But, to steal Plantinga's title, that's not the way it's supposed to be. And it's not the way it has to be either. Listen to Jesus: "Whoever drinks the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I will give them will be in them a well that springs up to eternal life." Those are words of life, those are words of hope, both for those who sin and for those who are sinned against.

I know that so far I have come, and in what follows I will come, nowhere near giving a comprehensive account of sin. I'll have nothing to say, for example, about the sin of a grossly unfair public school system that visits the sins of the parents upon the children. I'll have nothing to say about the sin of self-serving churches that store up blessings instead of pouring out their love and resources for the kingdom. I'll have nothing to say about the sin of nations and alliances that resort to force and the threat of force as something much closer to a first resort than a last one. And I'll have nothing to say about the sin of an arts community that is more interested in scandalizing people than in evoking awe as well as shock.

Sin is as big and wide and deep as all humanity. The catalog of sin fills many volumes. The images on the pages are more graphic and disturbing than any artist has imagined, and the damage chronicled there more severe than any weapons designer has conceived. But many, even most, if not all, sins have this in common: a poor sense of direction, so that we wind up looking for life in the wrong places. We look for life by turning toward death, which is to say, we look for life by turning away from God, by forsaking the "fountain of living water."

But Jesus promises life. Jesus is life. He is the life-giver who will supplant every death-dealer. He is the artist, the peacemaker, the teacher, the companion and friend. He is the lover and the beloved. He is the dreamer and the dreamed.

Jesus invites us to ask him for living water, for the water of life. That's why we're here, to drink our fill. We have sinned. We have been sinned against. We have become the victims of our own sin. And we have turned to Jesus for life, turned to him because he has restored our sense of direction enough, at least, so that we can find him. (That's the way it's supposed to be!)

So, that's a little bit about sin, and about redemption. The good news is this: Through Jesus Christ sin is no longer our home. It may be where we're from. And we may visit there too often and fill

our mouths with sand. But sin is not where we belong. And it's not where we need to stay. Because through Jesus Christ something new is springing up in us. It's called life, real life.