

Welcome

Imagine that you go to a friend's house. They welcome you in, offer you a seat and then ask, "Can I get you something to drink?"

You say yes, and they go to the cupboard, retrieve a glass and then walk to the backyard. They've got a little raincatcher back there that drains into old milk jugs. You watch as they lift up one rain jug - it's about half full - even from inside you can see the waterline when your friend pours the water into your glass.

As they're coming back inside, you try to remember the last time it rained. Two weeks ago? Three? Your friend hands you the glass of cloudy water and looks at you expectantly.

You clear your throat and ask, "Uh, what's wrong with your plumbing?"

Your friend looks confused. "What do you mean?" they ask.

You gesture with your glass. "I mean... is your sink broken? Are *all* your sinks broken?"

Your friend takes a long pull on their own cloudy water. They cough a little before setting their glass back down, which does not exactly inspire confidence in your own glass.

Still looking confused, they walk over to the sink and turn on the faucet. Cool, clean, *clear* water comes gushing out. They turn the faucet back off and say, "Nothing's wrong with the sink. Why do you ask?"

I want you to picture yourself sitting there. Staring at that cloudy glass of stagnate rainwater you're holding. Looking back at your friend, standing in front of a perfectly functional faucet.

It's uncomfortable. It's *absurd*.

I want to invite you to hold onto this image because it's a (slightly updated) version of one used by the prophet Jeremiah to illustrate the profound absurdity of God's people in his day.

Despite God's presence among us, Jeremiah warns, we so often look to all sorts of other things for refreshment, for life.

It's poisonous. It's deadly. And the only antidote is to tell God's good story again and again. So let's begin by singing together, celebrating the God who is living and active and present among us now.

Message

I know a lot of Christians these days who feel like Black Sheep - the one who doesn't fit in. Not from the larger culture, but from the Church. Now that's not necessarily a new phenomenon, but when I was growing up, you felt distance from the Church because you were drifting from faith.

Today, though, a lot of the folks who are feeling this sense of isolation, of being the weird one - it's not because of weak faith. It's actually the opposite

And it's not because they're drifting or backsliding or wandering from their faith. It's actually our faithfulness *to* Jesus that's making us feel like outsiders to our own faith. The people who claim to represent Jesus don't actually look very much like him.

This is the experience of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in the years leading up to the Exile, one of the most apocalyptic and formative events in the history of God's people. Jeremiah was born into a world in the shadow of the Babylonian Empire, and the little nation of Judah spent decades trying to figure out how to survive Babylon. They made payments to the emperor to keep him from conquering them. They entered into alliances with other nations.

This was the big point of contention, because these alliances involved adopting the other nations' gods - a sort of cultural exchange. This idolatry was a violation of the covenant between God and God's people. It was a signal that God's people didn't trust that God's way would preserve them, protect them and provide for them. The people continued to give lip service to God, but their actions showed they preferred to trust the power of the nations around them.

Sound familiar?

If you can relate, then this series is for you. We're spending a couple of months with Jeremiah, to bear witness to his faithfulness and ask what we can learn about how God is calling us as a Black Sheep church today.

Last week, we began with an exploration of Jeremiah's call, which was a call for all of us to ground ourselves in God's love for us. Today, we're moving into God's case against God's people.

Probably the most common metaphor the prophets used for God's relationship to God's people was marriage. They depict Yahweh as a powerful king, a faithful husband who chose Israel as his wife, lifting her out of slavery and poverty to become his crown jewel. But throughout their long history, God's people refused to be faithful. Again and again, Yahweh finds her in bed with other gods.

Stepping out of the metaphor, that is political language. It means that, rather than be faithful to the particular covenant they made with Yahweh, their 'marriage vows', their agreement to live by Yahweh's path. Worshiping other gods meant literally becoming like them - oppressive, rather than liberating.

Jeremiah presents this passage as a legal decree. So picture us in a courtroom, in a divorce trial. Jeremiah, as the prophet, has been called to represent Yahweh, the aggrieved spouse. Let's listen as he presents God's case:

The Lord gave me another message. He said, "Go and shout this message to Jerusalem. This is what the Lord says:

"I remember how eager you were to please me as a young bride long ago,
how you loved me and followed me even through the barren wilderness.
In those days Israel was holy to the Lord, the first of his children.
All who harmed his people were declared guilty, and disaster fell on them.

I, the Lord, have spoken!" -- Jeremiah 2:1–3 (NLT)

Jeremiah starts by reviewing the early history of Israel, when God first liberated them from slavery and they 'fell in love' in the wilderness. God points back at that time and says, "I fulfilled every part of my covenant to you. I protected you, provided for you.

The people, on the other hand, were *not* faithful. God goes on to ask why (and remember, this is rhetorical):

Listen to the word of the Lord, people of Jacob—all you families of Israel! This is what the Lord says: "What did your ancestors find wrong with me that led them to stray so far from me?

They worshiped worthless idols, only to become worthless themselves.
They did not ask, 'Where is the Lord who brought us safely out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness—a land of deserts and pits, a land of drought and death, where no one lives or even travels?'

"And when I brought you into a fruitful land to enjoy its bounty and goodness, you defiled my land and corrupted the possession I had promised you.

The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?' Those who taught my word ignored me, the rulers turned against me, and the prophets spoke in the name of Baal, wasting their time on worthless idols.

Therefore, I will bring my case against you," says the Lord. "I will even bring charges against your children's children in the years to come. -- Jeremiah 2:4–9 (NLT)

God says, "They worshiped worthless idols, only to become worthless themselves."

The word Jeremiah uses here is *hevel* - it's the same word the teacher uses in Ecclesiastes when he says, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless." The word literally means 'vapor' - like the fog on those summer dawns that burns away with the sunrise.

This is another common theme in the prophets - that the gods of the surrounding nations, the gods Israel and Judah worship in forming all these political alliances, don't exist. They're empty nothings.

And the prophets want us to know one core truth: You are what you worship.

What we give our allegiance to matters. What we set as our north star, our guiding light, matters. Because we become what we worship.

SONG

We are what we worship.

God's complaint against the people in Jeremiah's day was that they were two-timing God. While they continued to give lip-service to Yahweh, they made their bed with the gods of the nations around them.

We should be really clear about this: the nation of Judah never stopped offering sacrifices in the Temple. They kept all the holidays and feast days. They observed the Sabbath. If you'd asked *them*, they likely would've said they were still worshipping Yahweh.

Which begs the bigger question, "How do we know who we're worshipping?" The prophets' answer was provocative - You are what you worship.

In other words, if we look at your life, we can probably tell who you're worshipping. Because you're going to look like them. In Jesus' ministry, he used a tree metaphor. We're trees, and our worship plants us in certain soil. If we're worshipping Yahweh, we're going to bear fruit consistent with Yahweh's way. If we're not, we're going to bear fruit that doesn't look like Jesus at all.

So in Jeremiah's day, you could see what the people were worshipping by looking at the world they created. It was a world filled with injustice, where the strong preyed on the weak, where the rich abused and enslaved the poor, where they were hostile and suspicious toward outsiders.

This is more than just individuals not showing up for worship. This is institutional failure. The priests are not being faithful. The king is not being faithful. The scribes and legal experts are not being faithful. Rather than worship Yahweh, the God who chose them, who liberated them from slavery and made them into a nation, they are aligning themselves and the nation they lead with the gods - and the values and behaviors - of the world around them.

Friends, you can pick almost any issue you want and see a loud majority of American Christians taking anti-Christ stances on them. From the southern border crisis to economics to LGBTQ+ rights to dismantling racism to how we treat our teachers to public health... we could keep going and going.

I've lost track of the number of non-Christian friends who have told me they wish Christians actually acted like Jesus.

But again and again, we see politicians, pastors and other leaders using Jesus for their agenda with no concern for what Jesus teaches or how he lives. Instead, we we consider the fruits of

their policies and words, we find bigotry, discrimination, cruelty, oppression and injustice. It's not hard for us to look at them and say, "Whatever you're worshiping, it's not Jesus."

And here at the end of our passage for today, we find God at God's wit's end. God asks us to consider how totally bonkers it is to find a people who would act like this:

"Go west and look in the land of Cyprus; go east and search through the land of Kedar. Has anyone ever heard of anything as strange as this?"

Has any nation ever traded its gods for new ones, even though they are not gods at all? Yet my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols!

The heavens are shocked at such a thing and shrink back in horror and dismay," says the Lord.

"For my people have done two evil things: They have abandoned me— the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all! -- Jeremiah 2:10–13 (NLT)

Since I first started working on this sermon, I've been haunted by this imagery: the people need water. We're human. We thirst.

And we know God, the living water — which, by the way, is a poetic way to describe running water. In Jeremiah's day, that was a spring or river that flowed constantly, delivering fresh, clean water whenever we needed it.

Today, just imagine good ole indoor plumbing. Like... I get thirsty, so I go to the faucet and get a glass of cool, filtered water. It's delicious and refreshing. Life-giving.

God says, "This is what I am - an endless source of free, refreshing life for you. For all of you."

But rather than drink from the living water, what are the people doing? We're out digging cisterns - big pits to catch and store rainwater. Cisterns are how people survived in places they didn't have access to living water.

But you know what happens to water when it sits, right? It stagnates, begins to grow algae and amoebas. Stagnant water will kill you after a while. (It's dead water... get it?)

No competent, reasonable person would dig a cistern next to a spring.

And yet God says this is exactly what God's people are doing by making their beds with these other gods. Their faithlessness is like digging leaky cisterns while they're sitting next to a fresh spring.

When we look at all those faith leaders who have put their hopes in politicians and political parties, we should weep. They're digging leaky cisterns with their backs to the rushing river of God's mercy.

When we see politicians wearing a cross pin and shouting “In God We Trust” while advocating for the wealthy and privileged, we should weep. They’re catching rain in a tarp full of holes, all the while ignoring the endless stream of God’s grace.

And of course we ought not only look at them, friends. We ought to examine the fruit of our own lives as well. Are our lives producing love, joy, peace-making and patience? Are we kind and generous and faithful and gentle and self-controlled?

If not, friends, it’s time to turn away from those leaky cisterns you’re digging and drink freely from the living water.

We can only be a community of hope when we offer fruit that is for healing. And that fruit comes only from God’s Spirit!

Communion + Examen

Come to the living water.

Looking at my life, who is at the center? What or who is the object of my worship?

Where am I tempted to look for sustenance and security other than God?

How can I orient my worship toward God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

The priests did not ask, ‘Where is the Lord?’ Those who taught my word ignored me, the rulers turned against me, and the prophets spoke in the name of Baal, wasting their time on worthless idols. – Jeremiah 2:8

Spiritual Practices - telling the story of God so it becomes our story