

I have mentioned before in a sermon that whenever I go out for coffee, and, you know, they write your name on the cup, and they say, "What's your name, sir?" I always say, "James." And the reason is I'm not trying to hide my identity. It's just that people seem to have a problem understanding what I say when I give the name Mark. I had a new one this week. Someone asked what my name was. I said, "Mark." And they said, "Hello, Tom." I don't understand it.

Anyway, I tell you this as there's another word, and it's a word that I'm preaching on today that Americans seem to struggle with. Whenever I go to a restaurant, and the waiter or the waitress comes over and we'll sit down, and they'll say, "What would you like to drink?" And I'll say, "Oh, can I please have some water?" And they look at me and say, "What?" And it always strikes me as, oh, what do they think I'm asking for? I'm sitting there with an empty glass in front of me, but they never seem to have the imagination to think that I might be asking for a glass of water.

Anyway, I've taken to answering that question by saying, "Oh yes, please. Can I have a glass of waater?" And then they get it. There's no problem. And I hope that I don't have to say that this morning. In this "season of creation", so far, we've been thinking about seeds, rocks, and today, water. But please understand that when I say water, what I mean is "waater".

Water is essential for life. You can survive for about 40 days without food, but only a day or two without water. And those of us living in California know that water is a very precious resource, indeed. It's a scarce resource. It's a resource that's heavily used in industry, not just in farming but also in other industries. It takes 10 gallons of water, apparently, to make a gallon of petrol. It takes 65,000 gallons of water to make a ton of steel. And water is a raw material in our own bodies. 70% of our makeup is water. We can't have life without water.

So given how important water is, it's perhaps not surprising that the Bible has a lot to say about water. I won't go through every reference, you'll be pleased to know. But I will pick one aspect of the Bible's teaching on water. In the Bible, we see a distinction that's drawn many times between water, as in what comes out of a faucet, and "living" water. It's not easy to understand, but if our bodies need water, our souls need living water.

And I want to explore a bit further and think about what this living water means. A good place to start is that gospel we've heard from the gospel of John, where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman by a well in the middle of the day. They have a rather strange conversation which begins by Jesus asking the woman for a drink and then develops into him telling her that he could give her living water and promising that anyone who drinks of this living water will never thirst again.

And, but this isn't the Bible's first reference to living water. We find it in the Old Testament, in the book of Jeremiah, for instance, where through the Prophet Jeremiah, God complains that his people have forsaken him, the fountain of living water, and they've relied instead on cisterns that they've dug themselves. A cistern is a manmade shallow collection tank. There's no water flowing into it. It just collects rainwater, so it's reliant on the rain. It can't refill itself, so it's usually dirty water full of bugs and parasites. Cisterns are full of stagnant water.

So the opposite of living water is stagnant water. And the message of the Prophet Jeremiah is simple. The people have rejected God, the spring of living water, and they've relied on their own efforts and satisfied or tried to satisfy the deep longings of their lives by drawing on cisterns rather than God's spring. And people still make that choice. Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me, and I'll provide streams of living water." But how many people take up that invitation? Too few.

Imagine you are walking on the John Muir Trail, and it was a hot August afternoon, and you finish

the hike, tired and thirsty. And as you come to the end of the trail, you notice just a bit in the distance a huge refrigerator with a glass door and inside bottles of crystal spring water. And the water says free, help yourself. You're so thirsty you go there, open the door, and drink the refreshing, cool water.

And as you're satisfying yourself with this clean water, you'll notice a man coming to the end of the trail. He looks even more tired and thirsty than you are. And you know, he just can't wait for a drink. But to your surprise, he stops at the end of the trail and knees down and drinks from a small fish pond that you've passed on the way, a pond full of fish and lily pads and frogs, and like most unattended ponds filled with algae, green, stagnant, and murky.

So there's this man with his face buried in the water slurping away. So your curiosity gets the better of you, and you go over and say, "Why aren't you drinking this lovely spring water? Why are you drinking out of the fish pond? You'll get sick drinking that polluted water." And he says to you, "Well, I saw the cooler, the fridge over there, but the pond was closer, more convenient, and I was real thirsty."

What do you think of this guy? Wouldn't you think he was crazy drinking out of a fish pond instead of clean water? But surely and sadly, that's how many of us go through life, drinking from the fish pond, ignoring the fresh supply of living water. I know I've done that. I still do it. I can get drawn away from God's living water and find myself drawing on the stagnant water that's easy and close by.

It has a strange attraction, stagnant water. I've drawn there, even though I know it does me no good. I know where the stagnant water is in my life. I know the places I can go to for refreshment that don't really refresh me. How about you? Where's the stagnant water around you? It could be an addiction, a relationship, an unhealthy ambition. It could be any number of things.

Whatever it is, let's leave it behind and pursue, instead, the springs of God's living water.

The Samaritan woman at the well in this story recognized Jesus as the source of living water that could refresh her. The story ends with her rushing back to the village to tell her friends about this amazing man she's met and what he's promised. And there's one little detail at the end of the story, which I think is significant. It says that she left her water jar by the well when she went back to the village.

And I think that's the symbol, an important symbol, of her leaving her cisterns behind. She didn't need the jar anymore because she found the source of living water, which prompts me to leave you with a question. What do you need to leave behind so that you can drink deeply from the springs of God's living water, which alone can satisfy our thirsty souls? Amen.