



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – September 14, 2008

Clear Out The Spring!

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## Isaiah 58:1-14

1 *Shout out, do not hold back!*

*Lift up your voice like a trumpet!*

*Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.*

2 *Yet day after day they seek me*

*and delight to know my ways,*

*as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;*

*they ask of me righteous judgments,*

*they delight to draw near to God.*

3 *"Why do we fast, but you do not see?*

*Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"*

*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.*

4 *Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.*

*Such fasting as you do today*

*will not make your voice heard on high.*

5 *Is such the fast that I choose,*

*a day to humble oneself?*

*Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,  
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?*

*Will you call this a fast,*

*a day acceptable to the LORD?*

6 *Is not this the fast that I choose:*

*to loose the bonds of injustice,*

*to undo the thongs of the yoke,*

*to let the oppressed go free,*

*and to break every yoke?*

7 *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*

*and bring the homeless poor into your house;*

*when you see the naked, to cover them,*

*and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

8 *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,*

*and your healing shall spring up quickly;*

*your vindicator shall go before you,*

*the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.*

9 *Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;*

*you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,*

*the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil*

*10 if you offer your food to the hungry*

*and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness*

*and your gloom be like the noonday.*

11 *The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,*

*and make your bones strong;*

*and you shall be like a watered garden,*

*like a spring of water,*

*whose waters never fail.*

12 *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;*

*you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;*

*you shall be called the repairer of the breach,*

*the restorer of streets to live in.*

13 *If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,*

*from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;*

*if you call the Sabbath a delight*

*and the holy day of the LORD honorable;*

*if you honor it, not going your own ways,*

*serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;*

14 *then you shall take delight in the LORD,*

*and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;*

*I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,*

*for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

## Luke 13:10-17

### Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman

10 *Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11 And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14 But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." 15 But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? 16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" 17 When he said this,*

*all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.*

We had just moved onto our little farm in the Maryland countryside. As I was carting some of the last boxes into the house, I looked up to see our new neighbor, Bert Zirn, ambling across the field to welcome us to the community. Bert was about 70 years old, dressed in the only outfit I ever saw him wear: grease-stained, blue, Sears “Hit ‘em Hard” pants, a frayed flannel shirt and the most worn out, beat up, red “Peterbilt” truck cap I had ever seen. He shook my hand with one of those rough grips that always makes me embarrassed at how soft my own hands are, and we began the first of what would be hundreds of conversations over the next ten years.

The pattern of these conversations was usually the same: I would pick Bert’s brain for his seven decades of farming wisdom, then Bert would squint and see how few syllables he needed to construct an answer. But that first day, that first day Bert wanted to tell me a story: a story about how he had discovered the spring hidden down in the woods by our lower pasture.

It seems that during the ‘30s the area had been hit by a particularly bad drought. As the drought dragged on, Bert’s crops withered, his pastures baked and, finally, his well failed. The farm was miles from city water, so a failed well got Bert’s full attention. As his family neared desperation, Bert found that the spring at the bottom of our hill was still running fresh and cold. For three weeks, he and his wife Grace lugged buckets of water up from the spring, making do until the rains returned. It was a great story, a neighborly tip about our hidden little spring, and a colorful reminder of how elemental fresh water has always been for human life.

I didn’t see the connection between Bert’s story of a life-giving spring and Biblical metaphors for God’s life-giving Spirit until I arrived at seminary, 11 years later. Like Bert, the people of Israel were farmers and herders; but their land was even drier than the Maryland countryside, and water all the more precious. So when the Biblical poets sought to describe their yearning - their thirst for God’s mysterious, up-welling Spirit in their lives - it was only natural that they use the imagery of a spring or a wadi. Today’s reading from Isaiah speaks of the people’s

“needs in parched places” (Isaiah 58:11); Psalm 42 cries, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

From what I can tell from my own experience and from discussions with many of you over the years, this thirst, this yearning is almost always the first movement of our spiritual experience. For most of us, our spiritual journey begins in earnest with a thirst we can’t quite slake, a hunger we can’t quite feed, a restlessness we can’t quite settle.

Sometimes this yearning comes on with a sudden fierceness, as when we fear for our lives or the life of a loved one. But more often, the thirst comes on gradually, relentlessly. As theologian Paul Tillich described it, our complacency melts when, year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, or when life leads through a long valley of loneliness, or when we feel “disgust at our . . . own weakness, our hostility, our lack of direction or composure.” [Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted” in Shaking the Foundations.]

And here’s the most important point: this thirst, this yearning, this restlessness is not a sign of God’s absence. It’s not a sign of God’s absence but rather of God’s presence: a sign that God’s Spirit is poking us, prodding us, calling us to turn back to God. God is like the father playing hide and seek who keeps clearing his throat so that his child can find him.

As our complacency melts away, as our thirst turns us back to God, as our new-found spiritual urgency drives us to our knees and sharpens our prayer; we find suddenly, mysteriously, graciously, that God has been there all the time, just yearning to satisfy our thirst. Today’s Isaiah reading promises we that shall be “like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never fail.” (Isaiah 58:11) And elsewhere, Isaiah prophesies that “they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them” (Isaiah 49:10).

If our first spiritual movement is a thirst, a hunger, a restless yearning that turns us back to God then our second spiritual movement is the unearned up-welling of God’s grace as we turn. It begins not with a creed,

not with a dogma, not with a theology - though all of those may come in time. Rather it begins with a direct, personal experience of God's love. Where we felt parched and withering we now feel curiously lush and alive. Where we felt hungry and hollow we now feel curiously full and content. Where we felt anxious and fearful we now feel curiously at peace and reassured. The second movement of spiritual experience is the tasting God's life-giving water of Grace.

After Bert left, Amy and I strapped Owen into his little backpack and hiked down the back pasture to search out the hidden spring. It was a beautiful October day, and as the falling leaves swirled around us, we followed the trail into the woods to a beautiful horseshoe-shaped dell. While the trail had been bordered only by dead wood, honeysuckle brambles and fallen leaves, here there was suddenly a stand of ferns and Virginia Bluebells and Spring Beauties long past their prime. The only thing missing was the promised spring.

We could see dampness under the fall leaves and a sodden depression, but no running water. The spring had been neglected for so long that it was now clogged with algae and dead leaves. We spent about an hour clearing out the leaves and algae from the spring and then headed further down the trail to explore our woods. When we returned, the spring was running fresh and strong, and the little depression had filled with clear, cold water.

Israel used the imagery of neglected or fouled springs to depict man's complacency or neglect of God's Spirit. In Jeremiah, God laments "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 the book of Hosea, Israel's king leads them to worship Baal instead of the Lord. God's judgment is depicted as an "east wind [that] shall come, a blast from the Lord, rising from the wilderness; and his fountain shall dry up, his spring shall be parched." [Hosea 13:15]. Proverbs 25 warns, "Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked."

This imagery of fouled springs brings us to the third movement of our spiritual journeys. If our first

movement is our spiritual thirst that turns us back to God, and if our second movement is our soul-restoring chance to drink deeply of God's Spiritual spring; then our third movement is our effort to maintain our openness to God: our part in keeping the spring clear and flowing. This is the movement that encompasses almost all of our religious commandments, commitments and practices.

The people of Israel experienced God's life-giving Spirit as Moses came down from Sinai with the tablets, so they then adopted the Mosaic code hoping to maintain God's favor. The disciples experienced the love of God directly in the presence of Jesus the Christ, so to this day we Christians celebrate his Last Supper to maintain communion with His Spirit.

Here, in this third movement, we walk a narrow path between two pitfalls. On the one side is our tendency to lapse back into complacency. Having been restored by God's grace, we spiritually flourish, and as we flourish we begin to delude ourselves that our good fortune flows from the well of our own resources. We neglect God's spring, confident that we can build our own cisterns. We either abandon our worship forms or let them slip into dry, listless performances. This is the neglect lamented by Isaiah when he calls the Israelites to account for observing the Sabbath in name only. They are just going through the motions, taking a Sabbath break but filling it up with their own busyness. Yes it's a Sabbath, but a Sabbath without rest, a Sabbath without joy, a Sabbath that has become a neglected spring. That's the complacency pitfall on one side of life's path.

On the other side of the path is the legalization pitfall. We become so focused on the forms of religious practice and rules that we forget they were never meant to be more than means to an end: means to keeping the spring of God's Spirit clear. This is the pitfall decried by Jesus when he confronts the Pharisees as whitewashed tombs: spotless on the outside but dead to the spirit on the inside. In Luke, the Pharisees criticize Jesus for healing a woman on the Sabbath, freeing her from the crippling bondage of a dark spirit. Jesus argues that just as we untie our donkeys on the Sabbath and lead them to water, so God means to free us on the Sabbath and lead us to God's Spirit. [Luke 13:10-17.] The Sabbath is not a legal burden to constrict our

spiritual springs, but rather the space and freedom to keep the springs clear so we might drink deeply.

Age after age, we clog our spiritual springs with either our complacency or with our legal brick-a-brack, and age after age God sends a prophet to call us back, to clear out the spring. "It's simple!" Isaiah cries, "stop celebrating the Sabbath in name only, turn back to the Lord and rejoice! Clear out the spring!" And for a time we do, until the Pharisees dam up the spring with hundreds of day and diet regulations. So Jesus comes crying, "It's simple! The Sabbath was made for man! Turn back to the Lord and rejoice! Clear out the spring!" And for a time we do, until the Judaizers appear in Paul's churches demanding circumcision and bans on idol meat. So Paul writes to his churches crying, "It's simple! Faith consists of neither circumcision nor uncircumcision! Neither eating idol meat nor refusing idol meat! Turn back to the Lord and rejoice! Clear out the spring!" And for a time we do, until the church builds up a system of penances and indulgences, so Martin Luther comes to us crying, "It's simple! Works and rote observances avail nothing, turn back to the Lord and rejoice! Clear out the spring!" And for a time, we do.

But what of us here this morning? We should be master spring-clearers, for we are masters of prompt maintenance. Look around our Meeting House. As soon as something goes out of line in this building, somebody's fretting over a repair. We know a chip or a crack are rarely just a chip or a crack: they're signs! Footings are sinking or a foundation is settling! We need to get on that right away!

But are we as prompt to spot the needs for spiritual maintenance? Are we as quick to discern when complacency has clogged the spring?

Have you put off resting and rejoicing on the Sabbath because you just have too much to do? That's not just a chip or a crack, it's a sign! Maybe it's a sign that you have taken on too much - that you are putting more emphasis on the kudos you might earn than on the grace God wants to give you for free. Maybe it's time to clear out the spring!

Do you find it awkward and joyless to spend the entire Sabbath with the family? That's not just a chip or a crack, it's a sign! Maybe it's a sign that you've

drifted off into corners of polite isolation, that you've lost the spark that makes even quiet moments together a joy. Maybe it's time to clear out the spring!

I had an occasion to talk to a marriage counselor, and he asked me: "Why are there so many problems with New Canaan couples?"

I said, "I don't know, I thought that was your profession."

He said that when he spoke to his fellow counselors they thought it's something like this:

A couple comes together and falls in love. They may be living in New York and they see each other all the time. They get married, maybe they have a child and they move out to New Canaan. Now the breadwinner has an hour and a half commute. He comes home at night around 9:00, exhausted. There's no energy left for anything but collapsing in front of the TV, a little comfort food and some mind-numbing entertainment before drifting off to sleep. And whoever is taking care of the kids is in the same boat: exhausted. So we don't see much of each other during the week.

And when we come to the weekend, this is our chance to finally be together. But guess what! At 8:30 Saturday morning, Muffy has field hockey in Trumbull and Buffy has soccer in Greenwich. So mom goes one way with one; dad goes the other way with the other. We rendezvous at 5:30 at night at a pizza shop, go home, get the kids to bed and we're exhausted.

See Sunday, repeat; because now sports are on Sunday, too. And guess what? After 15 years you don't have the friendship or the relationship to have the resiliency to withstand difficult times. Maybe we need to think as a community about clearing out that spring.

Do you feel you're undermining your nine-year-old's future if the Sabbath isn't spent sharpening his prospects of playing college hockey? That's not just a chip or a crack, it's a sign! Maybe it's a sign that you somehow feel your child's happiness depends more on college admissions than it does on the love of God. Maybe it's time to clear out the spring!

You know we have a funny phenomenon here. Today is our largest day, usually, of kids attending Sunday

School. We register about 400 kids, we get 180 kids week one, about 205 this week, and then it drifts down to about 100 a week. That's 25% of our kids in Sunday School for 45 minutes, one time a week. Now we know from experience and national studies, that the more time a child spends in church the more they are exposed to the notion that they have a home base of love and trust in God. The kind of unconditional love that makes it possible to go out into the world and be independent knowing they have a trustworthy home base. And we know that children that go to church are less likely to have problems with alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, etc. We know this. But why are we drawn away? Sometimes it's because we have sports on Sunday mornings, and that's hard to face as an individual parent. But maybe that's a spring we need to address together as well. Couldn't they have just one day to be just kids, together with their family?

Do you find it intolerably boring to slow down to rest and rejoice on the Sabbath? Are you always sneaking a furtive little peek at your Blackberry? That's not just a chip or a crack, it's a sign! Maybe it's a sign that you have been gunning your engine for so long that you've lost the ability to shift into neutral and be at peace. Maybe you've lost the ability to heed God's simplest request: "Be still and know that I am God!" [Psalm 46]. Maybe it's time to clear out the spring!

Now none of this is meant to suggest that changing long held habits will be easy or that clearing the spring of these clogs will happen overnight. Sometimes we simply have to do the best we can with conflicts we can't resolve on our own; sometimes we need help and advice from elders who have walked this path before; and sometime we need to seek solutions with other members of the congregation or community. But even here, even where the spring seems hopelessly blocked, there is hope. For our sorrow and frustration can lead us back to the first movement of the Spirit, back to the thirst, back to the hunger, and back to the restless yearning for communion with God, and back to the urgent prayers that can start the whole cycle of grace again.

We can pray for help; we can pray for resolution; we can pray to the one who promised, "ask and it shall be given, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened for you." We can pray to the one who

promised, "those who drink the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." [John 4:14]. **AMEN.**