

Cracked Cisterns – Jeremiah 2:4-13 – August 28, 2016

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Last week we talked about the call story of Jeremiah and his fear that as a young boy, no one would listen to what he had to say. Being a prophet was no easy task. It was a very thankless calling, and it wouldn't win him a lot of friends. Prophets tended to be purveyors of gloom and doom. And from our lesson this morning, we quickly see that Jeremiah would be no different. The message that God gave to Jeremiah to speak to the people of Israel and Judah was a harsh message indeed. It's not one that we like to hear. I think it's safe to say we much prefer the messages of forgiveness and hope and grace and love. But every so often it's good for us to hear the other side, to take a deep look inside ourselves, and see where we too have missed the mark.

On first hearing, the words of God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah seem full of anger. As you listened to the text this morning, what was your initial reaction? Discomfort? Disconnect? Distracted? Did you find yourself pulling away? Maybe even zoning out a little. Sometimes I find it hard to connect with images that appear to be so distant. Especially when the words seem so angry. We think of God as being synonymous with love. So images and words that run contrary to our expectations of a loving God cause us to pull back. We imagine here a wrathful God about to zap us into oblivion.

It may surprise us to realize that in fact our lesson from the Book of Jeremiah has its basis in love. The underlying image is that of a marriage between God and the nation of Israel. While Israel was still a bride, God led her out of slavery in Egypt and cared for her during the many years in the desert, and brought her into a new land. God promised to love her forever, yet once the honeymoon was over, Israel quickly broke her commitments.

The words of God through the prophet Jeremiah are filled with the anguish of one who has been betrayed by their beloved. Certainly they are angry words, but they are also words filled with shock, deep hurt and anguish. If you have ever experienced betrayal, you understand the feeling. Betrayal can occur between spouses, parents and children, friends, or even business partners. Any time there exists a close relationship between two parties, the possibility for betrayal exists. And when it does occur, intimacy and trust are completely broken. It's a gut-wrenching feeling of loss.

The people of Israel and Judah had not only turned away from God, but had gone after the false gods of Canaan. The people turned away from the one true God, who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt into a new land, and then they started to worship the fertility gods of this new land. And it wasn't just the regular people who turned away. The priests, the teachers, the rulers and the prophets all betrayed God. They're all listed in the text of Jeremiah. The leaders. The

ones who ought to know better. They too broke the First Commandment and followed other gods.

The text says that they went after worthless things and became worthless themselves. They followed false gods and engaged in pointless religious rituals. They traded in the one true God for a hollow substitute. They worshipped something that had no substance, that had no value. And in doing so, they themselves became worthless. It's the idea that what you worship is what you become.

Parents tell their children to stay away from other children who are troublemakers. They don't want their kids hanging out with kids who do bad things. Because the parents are afraid the badness will rub off on them. Have you ever noticed that if you associate with people who are pessimists, you tend to look at the negative aspects of life. But if you surround yourselves with people who enjoy life, their positive nature helps you to see the good things.

And so it is with what we worship. The things that mean the most to us. The things that we focus on, spend our energy pursuing – those are the things that mold our lives. People who are focused on materialism and success, have chosen wealth to be their god. Some people put too much emphasis on their families. They live vicariously through their spouse or children. They become so enmeshed that nothing else matters, not even their own sense of self.

Others are led by their habits and addictions. The only thing that is important is how they will feed that addiction. I have known a few alcoholics, and I could not believe how controlled they were by their need for alcohol. Family, job, home, friends – none of these things mattered to them. Still others are controlled by their jobs. How quickly can they move up the career ladder and make a name for themselves. Success in their field consumes all their time and effort. Other people are consumed by causes or political or social agendas, to the detriment of family and other responsibilities.

In and of themselves, these things are all innocuous. But it is when we allow them to consume us. When we focus so much on them, we lose sight of what is really important. Our vision becomes distorted and we lose ourselves in something that is ultimately worthless. We have put something in the place where only God rightly belongs. When our focus is on something other than God, then our lives lose meaning. As God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, they followed what was worthless and they became worthless.

So how did this happen? God had brought Israel out of slavery, and gave them a new land. God forged a covenant with them and gave them the law to guide their lives. So what happened? How did the people fall away? The text from Jeremiah gives us a clue. Twice this same phrase is repeated – “and they did not say, ‘Where is the Lord?’” They did not say, “Where is the Lord?”

They forgot to ask the question. They forgot their heritage, their identity. They neglected to tell the stories of their history. Throughout the law these instructions are repeated – tell your children the story about God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people, tell them the story of the Exodus. But it wasn’t just the parents who forgot. It was also the leaders, the teachers of the law and the priests. They all forgot the story, because they quit asking the question “where is the Lord?” The rulers became corrupt, and the religious leaders saw no difference between the worship of God and the worship of Ba’al. They forgot who their God was, because they stopped asking the questions.

As the church, that is one of our responsibilities, to keep the stories alive. To continue to ask the question, “where is God?” Because more and more that question seems to becoming less and less important. And false gods begin to take the place of the one true God. All around us we here that church attendance is falling. Many young people are not coming to church, and when they do, they don’t know the stories, the history. Everyone has questions about life and meaning, and if the church can’t answer those questions, then people will look elsewhere for the answers.

Back in the Jeremiah passage, God makes a comparison between the people of Israel and Judah and the people of nearby nations. These other nations have always worshipped their gods. They haven’t turned away in order to worship other gods. They have remained loyal to their gods, even though the gods are false. But God’s very own people, they have traded in what is good and true for something that is worthless, nothing. They have given up perfection for junk. Like trading in a Rolex watch for a sundial. How absurd is that? It really makes no sense, and that makes the betrayal all the worse. They gave up the relationship with a loving and caring God for the worship of bit of wood and stone, the worship of idols.

Our passage concludes with metaphors describing the two sins that Israel and Judah had committed. They had turned away from, forsaken God, who is described as a fountain of living water. And they had dug for themselves cisterns, cracked cisterns that could hold no water. They gave up a flowing fountain of living water for a bunch of flawed cisterns.

The image of water is important for people living in an arid region. Water is life and is a very precious commodity. A cistern is an underground chamber that collects rainwater for use during the dry seasons. Some cisterns could be very large, holding hundreds of gallons of water – while I was in Israel I got to see many cisterns. In fact, one of the cisterns at Masada was massive. It had been dug out of the rock, and had a stone stairway leading down into it. As I stood at the bottom and looked up, I tried to imagine it full of fresh water. Without this water, no one could survive. A cracked cistern, that allowed the water to seep away, would be completely worthless.

An amusing outdoor game to play at kids' birthday parties is to challenge the kids to fill a large bucket with water using only small plastic cups. From a full bucket they could scoop out water with the cups and then run to the other bucket to fill it. The challenge is, the cups have holes punched in the bottom, causing the water leak out as they ran. It's a fun game for the kids, but it does illustrate the point that trying to collect water in a receptacle that is full of holes is an exercise in futility.

But the people of Israel and Judah choose the cracked cistern over the fountain of living water. They worshipped worthless gods rather than the one true God. Doesn't make a lot of sense, does it?

Yet we do it, too. We put other things in place of God in our lives. We worship the mundane; we get lured into following the gods of materialism and wealth, believing that it's okay, because we deserve the better things in life. We fall prey to an apathetic lifestyle, focusing on our own needs instead of concerning ourselves with the welfare of those who are destitute or marginalized. The practice of our faith becomes marginal in our lives, and our loyalty to God, ambivalent.

And how does this happen? The same way it happened to the people of Israel and Judah. We forget to ask the question, "where is God?" We forget the story of our heritage as the people of God. We would rather slip into our comfortable, safe life of living the American dream of comfort and prosperity instead of heeding the challenging call of God. It is a call that forces us to look at the world through God's eyes, to see the pain of the afflicted, and to do something about it.

Being a prophet was no easy calling, but Jeremiah was ready for the task. His job was to speak the word of God to an ambivalent and wayward people. To point out their failings and call them back to the one true God. His message is the same to us. It's time for us to look at our own lives. Have we pushed God aside in order that we might follow false gods? Where do we spend our time, energy and resources? On the things of this world, or on the things of God?

And if our focus is misplaced, how did we get here? As was pointed out in the passage from Jeremiah, it's probably because we've forgotten to ask the question, "where is God?" Perhaps it's time for us to reexamine that question in our own lives – Where is God?