

CRACKED CISTERNS
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures, which we will hear in a minute or two, uses the metaphor of a cracked cistern to challenge a wayward people – so I thought a little explanation might be in order, since most of us aren't all that familiar with cisterns. It's been a long time – more than 40 years – since I've seen one. Here in the US, we don't typically use them. Public water systems, or wells, or even springs, provide the most of the water upon which we depend, although I understand that in this part of the country you may encounter cisterns on old farmhouse properties.

But there are still many places in the world where public water supplies are nonexistent – where wells or springs are absent – and where water insecurity is a daily, life-threatening reality. In such places, it is not uncommon to find cisterns built or dug to contain precious and scarce rainwater.

That was the case when Bill and I and our son, Than, lived in Jamaica. Our water came from two large cisterns that were located downhill from our house. Our cisterns were built of cinder blocks with a waterproof lining, and covered with mesh screens designed to keep goats and dogs and debris and even children – yes, I'm thinking of you, Than – out. During the rainy season, water was diverted from our roof into the cisterns. Then there was a pipe that ran from the cistern to an elevated storage tank, with an electric pump that transferred water up hill. Gravity did the rest, bringing water from the storage tank into the house. That cistern water could be used for any household purpose, but it had to be boiled before it could be used for food preparation or to drink, because, untreated, it was unsafe for human consumption.

Cisterns have been around for thousands of years. In ancient Israel, they were essential to life in a dry land. Typically, they were dug out of limestone, but, because water would eventually seep through that porous stone, it was common to coat the inside of the cistern with plaster made from lime. The lime provided a sealant that kept the water from escaping, at least for a time. But often the dried lime plaster would crack and the water would seep out. A cracked cistern meant big trouble. A cracked cistern might even mean death.

And so it was that the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah used the metaphor of a cracked cistern to bring a word of judgment to ancient Israelites who had lost their way. Listen to these words from today's lesson:

Thus says the Lord:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?

They did not say, "Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?"

I brought you into a plentiful land, to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination.

The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?"

Those who handle the law did not know me;

The rulers transgressed against me,

The prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit. . .

. . . 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.

Jeremiah railed against the idolatry of the people:

- They had turned from the God of Israel to follow false gods – the transactional gods of the nations around them – gods who were thought to give goodies to those who followed them, but who had no concern for the ethics of life in community.
- The wealthy of the people were corrupt and greedy, and abused and exploited their workers.
- Fearing political weakness and failure in the face of the nations around them, Israel had sought to bolster its declining strength by making alliances with the great imperial powers, Egypt to the south and Assyria to the north.
- The people had quit telling the stories of their communal life – of their history.
- The religious leaders, the lawyers, the rulers, and the prophets all had lost their way.

You know, sometimes when we read a passage from the Bible we find ourselves shaking our heads and asking, “what could this possibly have to do with me, with my life, with my community?”. This is NOT one of those times. Jeremiah might just as well be standing on a DC street corner today, speaking a word of challenge to our own time and place. Can you hear him?

You have abandoned the way of love to go after worthless things, and you have become worthless yourselves.

Your priests, and lawyers, and rulers, and prophets have abandoned the way of peace and justice.

You have abandoned the fountain of living water that God offers and instead have dug out cisterns for yourselves – cracked cisterns that cannot hold water

You have lost your way.

Jeremiah’s words speak to us these thousands of years later because we share the same challenges that confronted the people of Israel so many years ago.

False gods? All around us we see allegiance to transactional gods – gods who, it is hoped, will give good things to those who follow them, but who have no concern for the ethics of life in community. We live in a time when many folks have concluded that Presidential or congressional or business ethics don’t matter as long as they get what they want: tax cuts for the wealthy; anti-abortion, anti-woman Supreme Court justices; white privilege; the rollback of legal protections for the LBGTQ community; corporate freedom from environmental protection; a bull stock market. Corruption of wealth? We see evidence everywhere we turn that the corruption and greed of the wealthy has resulted in the abuse and exploitation of workers. This Labor Day weekend, we watch with dismay efforts to reduce or even eliminate the power of unions; the growing wage gap between CEOs and workers; the focus on the well-being of shareholders over that of stakeholders.

Unholy alliances? Fearing weakness and vulnerability, we still seek alliances with power. Evangelical voting blocs take the side of the powerful over that of the marginalized. Fearful politicians join forces with the gun lobby even in the face of massive public support for common sense gun legislation.

And so it is that many of our religious leaders, lawyers, political figures, and even prophets have lost their way.

We are desperate for water – our lives depend on it – but instead of going to the source of living water, we have built cisterns to try to contain it, and those cisterns are leaking. The water that remains is brackish, unfit for human consumption, bound to make people who drink it sick.

- Government is broken, as is our trust in governmental leaders;
- Capitalism is struggling and at its best the stock market will never satisfy our deepest needs;
- Consumerism leaves us wanting;
- Rugged individualism fails us;
- Even institutional religion leaves us frustrated and uncertain.

All around us we see, in the words of Jeremiah, people who have gone after worthless things and have become worthless themselves – worthless, not in the sense of lacking intrinsic value as human beings, but in the sense of being empty, insubstantial, just so much hot air.

We thirst for something more. We long for lives that are full, substantial, meaningful. We yearn for the day when people of all races are valued and treated with dignity and respect; when sexual orientation and gender identity are celebrated as part of the rich diversity of the human family; when women have control over their own bodies; when immigrants are cared for and loved and valued; when we embrace our planet with love and care. But where do we find the fountain of living water in this dry, dry land? Where is love at work? Where is justice at work? Where is freedom at work?

Walter Brueggemann suggests an answer when he says “Sit and be still until in the time of no rain you hear beneath the dry wind’s commotion in the trees the sound of flowing water among the rocks, a stream unheard before, and you are where breathing is prayer.”

We are living in such a time – a time of drought, a time of no rain. Our cultural cisterns are cracked, and the water that remains in them is polluted. But when we sit still, when we listen, when we are open to the fountain of living water, we can sense its life-giving flow. And, having heard it, we find ourselves drawn to life in community with others who have learned to sit, to be still, to listen.

It’s hard to do that. It’s hard to sit, to be still, and to listen, when we see the terrifying results of cracked cisterns all around us. None of us knows what the future holds, but everywhere we turn, things look bleak. Our cultural cisterns are leaking, the water that remains in them is contaminated, and people are getting sick. And we each feel compelled to fix the problems we confront.

But even in the face of daunting challenges, we realize, despite presidential claims to the contrary, that no one person alone can “fix it” – there is no single “Chosen One” – not our President, not me, not you. It does, indeed, take a village. We *are* better together. Living water flows within each of us and then flows out from us in community – a life-giving stream of love and peace and justice that can’t – that won’t – be contained by any attempt to capture it. The future is unknown, but our lives right here, right now, can indeed be nurtured by living water that sustains us for the work we are called to do today and tomorrow and the day after that.

When Jeremiah witnessed great turmoil in the life of the people of Israel, he didn’t tell them to prepare more lime plaster to recoat the inside of those cracked cisterns. The answer didn’t lie in better cisterns, but rather in a never-ending fountain of living water. For ancient Israel, accessing that water involved remembering their past – remembering the ways in which that source had sustained and protected them from the days of Abraham and Sarah to the days of their exodus from slavery in Egypt. And so it is that we, too, access that living water as we remember the stories of our own lives – origin stories, and freedom stories, and rescue stories –

stories of journeys that were never without challenges but that nonetheless have led us to where we are today.

We need to remember and share with our children and grandchildren the stories of Quaker abolitionists and Freedom Riders; of Daniel Berrigan and Dorothy Day; of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.; of John Muir and Rachel Carson; of Alex McNeill and the Reverend Jess Cook; and the stories of how a group of Presbyterians in Shepherdstown, West Virginia became the solar paneled, all-inclusive, More Light congregation it is today.

This kind of remembering is not simply idle recollection of events from our past – not just “remember when the kids were little,” or “remember when we took that trip to the Gulf Coast”. William Halladay puts it like this: “. . . to the Israelite way of thinking, remembering is the way by which the past is recaptured in power for the present moment, almost as if there is a residue of energy in the past which can be appropriated and can make a real difference in the present situation.”

More than ever before, we need that power – that energy – that is available to us in a never-ending fountain of love, and justice, and peace that can, indeed, make a real difference in our own time and place.

Today as we share the bread and cup of our Eucharistic meal, remembering that Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” we are not just holding a memorial service, but rather we are allowing the Beloved to reenact love shared in community in all its present power. That love comes to us as we share this joyful feast; it comes to us in an ever-flowing fountain where justice rolls down like a river and righteousness like a never-failing stream.

May it be so. Amen.