

“Cracked Cisterns”

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

September 1, 2019

We hear in today’s passage the words of a broken-hearted God. These words come to us thanks to the pen of the prophet Jeremiah, probably a young Jeremiah, living in the last great days of the ancient kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah had the ability to sense God’s words; he was tasked with communicating God’s message to the country’s leaders and also to the common people. It was a thankless task; much of what he had to say would not be welcomed.

As I read over these words this week I found myself wondering: what would it be like to be able to get *inside* the mind of the Almighty? To be able to *sense*, to *feel*, God’s great despair? For despair it is. God sounds like a spurned lover. God and Israel had been *close* once. *Very* close. In a verse just before this passage, God said: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride.” God is speaking in the most *intimate* terms. When God says that “those who handle the law did not *know* me,” the word he uses for “know” is *ya’da*, the same word that is used for the intimacy of the marriage bed: “Now Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.” (Genesis 4:1) God and Israel used to *know* each other – not physically, of course, not like that, but there was an *intimacy* to that relationship, a special, sacred intimacy. They had been like a young, newly married couple, head-over-heels in love.

But then ... something happened. Something *changed* in the relationship. One of the parties in the relationship stayed faithful. The other did not. One remained true to their vows. The other did not.

So here God is now, centuries later, feeling spurned. Rejected. Abandoned. His lover, his bride, has chosen someone else, *committed adultery*, figuratively speaking, with someone else.

How would *you* feel, if that had happened to *you*? Angry? Bitter? Resentful? Wondering how it could have happened? Considering whether it’s possible to repair the relationship? He’s not thinking about leaving; he still wants a relationship with these people, even if he’s been abandoned, even if the people have consistently gone after other gods. He still *cares* for them, despite his pain. He still ... *loves* them. He wants, if possible, to rekindle the *intimacy* in the relationship that once had existed.

Now when someone is feeling spurned like this, they have to decide: are they going to keep quiet, or are they going to speak up? Are they going to let the other party know *just how much* they are hurting, *just how much* pain they are feeling, *just how much* they want the relationship to be restored to what it once was? God chooses ... to speak. Publicly. Through the prophet Jeremiah. And those words

resound through the ages, so that here, some 27 centuries later, we can *still* hear these words, *still* hear God's pain and anguish and heartache, *still* hear his hopes that the relationship would be restored.

So God speaks. "What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me?" Was there something *God* had done that had turned them away? No, of course not; *God* is not the one with the false heart. The people "went after worthless things," and in so doing, they "became worthless themselves." For that is what happens, when we pursue our own rebellious desires; we lose our sense of self-worth; if we've got any kind of a conscience, we feel regret over the choices we have made. Like David, after he committed adultery: "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." (Psalm 51:3) When you know you have done something really wrong, you feel pretty rotten inside, don't you?

But these people, they didn't even look back at the lover they had spurned. "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?'" God had done *so much* for these people, not because he *had* to, but because he *wanted* to; he *wanted* to show them grace and favor; he *wanted* to *bless* them. Yet they abandoned him. They didn't even look back. "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." He's talking about how so many of the Israelites adopted the religious practices of the native people of the land. Is this the way to say *thank you* to your God, your Savior, your Deliverer, by just *walking away*, and starting a relationship with *some other god* who hasn't done *anything* for you?

Now there are three groups of people, in particular, who should have made an effort to remain faithful: the *priests*, who were responsible for carrying out religious services; the *civic leaders*, who were responsible for shepherding the affairs of the entire country; and the *prophets*, who were responsible for conveying the word of God to the people. *God indicts all three*. All three groups are guilty; all three bear some responsibility for what happened to this relationship. The priests cared more about their rituals than they cared about God; many of the kings led wanton and ungodly lives; and many of the prophets had been telling the people what they *wanted* to hear, rather than what *God* wanted them to hear, or had been prophesying for gods-that-were-not-really-gods, like the Canaanite god Baal. If the *leaders* of a country lose all sight of God, is there any hope for the *common people* to remain faithful?

"Therefore once more I accuse you," says God, "and I accuse your children's children." Yes, even the generations yet unborn are going to be guilty. In the midst of all this idolatry, all this unfaithfulness, what hope is there that the children or the grandchildren will be faithful?

"Cross to the coasts of Cypress and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing." God is looking both west and east; westward, to Cypress, the great island nation in the Mediterranean; eastward, to Kedar, one of the great Bedouin tribes in the Arabian desert; in both places, it seems, there was not this waywardness; the countries had their gods, and the people were faithful to them. None of this dallying around with other gods, foreign gods, *worthless* gods.

What was different about this people? About this *relationship*? Could it have something to do with God's *high expectations* for them? Could it be that, with God, the bar is so high, the standards are so great, that it's *hard* to be faithful? That we slip up, time and time again; we feel like we have let God

down, and so – rather than do the hard work of repentance – we aim for something lesser? We choose a god for ourselves who isn't so demanding, who doesn't have such a high bar, doesn't care as much about the choices we make? We settle for something that *feels* good, something that will let us indulge our fantasies and longing, *without* making us feel guilty? We choose a *lesser god* with a *lower bar*?

“Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?” asks God. “My people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.” That's what all these false-gods offer: *nothing*. There is nothing to be *gained* by following these other gods. There is no *grace*. No *forgiveness*. No *freedom*. No *favor*. No *protection*. No *inheritance*. No *glorious riches*. No *eternal destiny*. No *heaven*. *Nothing* worth any meaning. Just ... *do what feels good*. And ... don't worry about what you've lost.

Is that *really* what we want? To receive *none* of God's gifts, *none* of God's blessings?

“Be appalled, O heavens, at this,” says God. “Be shocked, be utterly disconsolate.” It's a terrible choice these people have made, a terrible choice that sometimes *we* make, when we let our hearts go after false gods that do not *benefit* us in any way. *Why* would we give up on *all God's blessings*?

“My people have committed two evils,” says God. “They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water.” That's number one. Remember the conversation Jesus had with the Samaritan woman at the well: “Sir,” she pleaded, “give me some of this water.” She recognized, she *learned*, where true, living water was to be found. And she *wanted* it. Yet *we*, like the ancient Israelites, sometimes turn our back on the very water that would give us life. That's the first evil. The second is this: “they have dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.” In ancient Israel, they built cisterns, receptacles for catching and storing rainwater. We don't have cisterns here in modern America; we have water towers instead. They serve the same purpose, getting drinkable water to the people. The people of ancient Israel *depended* on those cisterns, for there would be long stretches of weeks or months where there would be no rain, and without those cisterns, there would be no water. If the cisterns were cracked, if they *leaked*, if they could not hold water – what would the people drink? What would quench their thirst? What God is saying is that Israel (metaphorically) gave up on the one-and-only cistern that truly *worked*, that truly *provided* for the needs of the people. They replaced it with broken cisterns, cisterns that would not *deliver* the water the people truly needed. The water *God* could provide. *Living* water. They turned their back on the *only* source that could nourish them with life.

I wonder how often *we* do that. How often do we turn our back on the source of living water, how often we turn instead to things-that-look-like-gods-but-really-aren't. How often do we turn to our own idols, expecting – at some level – them to provide the same kind of *benefit* that only God can provide. When does *sports* become our god? Or *entertainment*? (TV shows, video games, you name it.) Food, or drink? When you feel low, when you feel down, where do you turn? Is it *to God*? Or is it some false idol, some cracked cistern, someplace we go to just ease our pain, for a time?

There's only one place where we can get *living* water. *Nourishing* water. *Cleansing* and *healing* and *restoring* and *renewing* and *life-giving* water. There is only one fountain of *living* water.

© 2019 Rev. Bill Pinches