

Broken Cisterns Can't Hold Water: *Jeremiah 2:4-13*

Norwalk Christian Church, September 1, 2019, Proper 17, Year C

There's always a challenge when preaching on an ancient, prophetic text like Jeremiah. There is so much distance from the world of Jeremiah to our world. So many things we do not understand, or misunderstand. There is so much in this text that sounds so unfamiliar.

The whole nature of an ancient prophetic text, it's genre, it's type-of-speech, is foreign to us. We don't speak like this, preach like this, write like this. And this particular type of prophetic text, scholars call a lawsuit text. This type of writing is familiar for prophets, but not for us. The people of Israel live in a world of covenants, mutual agreements with mutual responsibilities and benefits. Israel is in a covenant with God. Both parties have roles to play. But the covenant has been broken, Jeremiah argues. God has kept God's end of the covenant. But the people haven't lived up to their end. And there is drought as a result.

So God is suing the people. And God ask familiar questions, ones we've been asked—or asked—when someone is hurt. What has God done wrong? Did God not love the people enough? Did God not bring the people out of slavery, lead them through the wilderness to a land of abundance, provide for all their needs? God has kept God's end of the covenant. But the people, they've forsaken God for another god that is not even real. They've turned away from God's abundance to things that are worthless. God is appalled, and the heavens should also be appalled. For God's people have committed two evils—and here is the basis of God's lawsuit—they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.”

Can you imagine a prophet walking in here today, standing before us to declare, “God is suing you! And here's why...!” I know y'all. That would not go well. This whole thing is unfamiliar to us.

What is a cistern anyway? It didn't rain much in ancient Israel. Average rainfall in that part of the world is less than half an inch per year. That meant it was imperative that they saved every drop that fell from the sky. Like our poet this morning, savoring every rain drop. Every stream from the rooftop was an opportunity for a cold drink, a bath, or the evening meal.

At some point in human history, someone in that part of the world invented a cistern--the first to ever do such a thing. At first they began digging holes to trap the water, but soon learned how ineffective this was. The water would quickly disappear back into the soil. So they began covering these holes with stone, like limestone, and the cistern was invented.

It was genius, a huge evolution for humanity, but it was imperfect. Cisterns eventually crack. And water searches for cracks. If it finds one, no matter how small, it will eventually escape in its entirety.

In this metaphor lies the divine accusation against the people.

Imagine a clear, flowing, cold stream rushing by, always supplying fresh, abundant, living water. And we say, no thanks. I'd rather risk drought, rely on my broken, leaky cistern. Eventually, the water runs out. Drought hits. We grow thirsty. We near death. All while forgetting that living water is rushing right there, close enough to smell.

This is what the people are doing, God says. How ridiculous?! This is so unfamiliar. We would never do such a thing.

And what about all this talk about idolatry. I don't know about you, but it seems kind of silly, really. Worshipping a golden statue, bowing down to a carved pole.

The false God the people are accused of worshipping is Ba'al. Even the name sounds silly. It's actually a word that simply means "lord", but it came to refer to a specific god whom they believed controlled the fertility of the land. It was believed that when Baal and his mistress, Asherah, had sex, then the land was fertile.

And so the people would worship Baal in leude ways. Ba'al worship could include orgies and prostitution. They even, at times, sacrificed their firstborn children, all while trying to woo Ba'al and Asherah into fertility. If the gods were happy, there would be more rain for their cisterns, more plentiful crops.

In other words, in hopes of having more food, more possessions, more money, they would give themselves over to be used and abused by Ba'al. They would sacrifice their time, their bodies, even their own children, for the sake of prosperity. They sought abundance, and in exchange for this promise of full store houses and full bellies, they emptied out their life and the lives of their children.

How ridiculous?! Giving up so much in the hopes of a stroke of luck? In the hopes of enticing an indifferent god to bless you? This is so unfamiliar. We would never do such a thing.

This text *is* so unfamiliar. But it's our word from the Lord today, so perhaps we should give it a hearing.

Can you imagine a prophet walking in here today, standing before us to declare, "God is suing you! And here's why...!" Imagine what might be said...

What case could God bring before us? I haven't seen you bowing down to idols, unless you're off doing it in the privacy of your own homes. I mean, one of you does make a cow out of butter, but I don't think there's any worshipping going on. And a few of you are big fans of those chainsaw carved images that are all the rage these days, but I haven't seen you making sacrifice to them. And no worries...I won't mention the pigskin worship that happened yesterday afternoon.

But do we sell ourselves for the sake of prosperity? Do we bow down, to markets and employers, to politicians and companies, to safety and guns, to low prices from low wages, to products and substances and pleasures—do we bow down, believing, hoping that they can provide what we need, what we lack?

Maybe this word from the Lord isn't that unfamiliar.

We do have an issue with clean water around here, and it's said the run off from our croplands are the single largest contributor to the 8,000 square mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, and it grows larger every day. Our water is polluted. And our pipes burst. Our water mains break. But we fix them. We clean our water. Purify it. Buy bottled water. We're not choosing to stick our face in the Des Moines River and drink deeply of unfiltered, the nitrate-flavored water. We aren't that ridiculous.

But don't we still have an insatiable thirst for more and more? We strip the land, pollute the water, dig and dig, burn and combust, buy and charge and mortgage--searching for more and more. The latest fads. The latest trends. New must be better, no matter the cost. Bigger churches. Bigger homes. The more we consume, it seems the less we have, the promise of more and better is nothing more than a leaky cistern that leaves us empty. We've consumed ourselves into drought.

Maybe this word from the Lord isn't unfamiliar after all.

Imagine, if you would, God walking in here today, standing before us to declare, "I am suing you! And here's why...!". Two great evils my people have done! They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water. Ouch. That hits close to home.

It sounds harsh. But listen closer. Can you hear the crack in God's voice? Look closer. Can you see the tears, love leaking out of the cracks?

After the case has been made, the judge speaks to offer the verdict. But the judge's voice; it's familiar. The prosecutor and the judge--both are God. That's when we realize, the whole court is rigged. God makes a case against us, and then God also determines our guilt and punishment? How unfair!

It's no surprise. We're guilty. We've broken the covenant. Give us our punishment!

No sentencing. No punishment. Instead, God renews the covenant. It was broken. Let's give it another go. And another. And another. How unfair.

Turns out, we're the cracked cisterns. And God is the one who keeps on pouring that living water into us, cracked and imperfect as we are. We can't even hold water--not yet. But God keeps pouring. Like a baptism of much-needed rain after a season of drought.

God keeps imagining, maybe this time they will leave the worthless Ba'als, those false gods that can never satisfy, and come to me and drink deeply from my abundant, living water.

It makes no sense. It's unfamiliar. But this is our God; the one who gives life, not takes it away; the one whose mercy and grace bubbles-forth from the dry ground and never run out; the one who begs us to leave behind the false things we keep stuffing our time, minds, and bodies with, and come and drink of the fresh, cold, clean spring of water that will satisfy our thirst and never run out.

May we wake in the night after these days of dry heat, to thespians of God's sweet, life-giving rain.

If *this* sounds familiar, let God's people say Amen.