

“Living Waters”

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Jeremiah 2.4-13

Luke 14.1, 7-14

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While in seminary I traveled to Israel and Palestine as part of a class. We visited churches and synagogues and mosques. We listened to Palestinians and Israelis. We ate delicious food and saw ancient ruins. After a few days we noticed that at nearly every site we visited we saw cisterns. To an ancient near easterner, this was important technology for survival. To those of us with the privilege of having water flowing at the turn of a faucet handle, it was just another hole in the ground. We joked about every cistern we saw – at least three or four a day – but we also learned about water and drought in the Middle East. In ancient times people were able to access water through cisterns and aqueducts. This was a matter of survival. Even while we were there in 2009, they were going through a drought. In Israel they were limited to how much water they could use, but in Palestine, those limits were enforced with water being shut off at random times, as well as electricity being shut off with no warning. At the same time, there were people in Israel who were privileged enough to have water running through gardens the entire day, flowing like a fountain. Water was a scarce resource for anyone who without power.

Of course, we’re seeing stories of drought today, as well. Rivers in Colorado and France are at the lowest they have been in our history. Climate change is altering our world and our natural resources at an alarming rate. These changes are happening because of the ways in which we and our ancestors have treated the earth. I think this example of the ways in which all are responsible for a fault is so clearly addressed in the Jeremiah passage. God talks both literally and figuratively about water to the people. God tells them about forsaken cisterns – cisterns that are empty because they were cracked and uncared for and no longer hold water.

The language used in the Hebrew in Jeremiah is deliberate and poetic in a devastating way. The word “empty” is repeated over and over to make a point – the people acted in an empty fashion – one that did not hold compassion or love or forethought. The cisterns are equally empty. Their hearts, their minds, the life giving source that is to fill them is empty. When the author says they acted emptily, it can also be translated as going after vanity, or going after that which is worthless. The author uses the term for worthless again later, and references the utter ruins that is left. The drought of the water, the drought of relational interaction among God and the people has left devastation and everything is desolate. It paints a picture of hopelessness and scarcity.

People don’t make the best decisions in situations of scarcity. When humanity fears there aren’t enough resources, enough water, enough money, enough love, we panic. We don’t share, but tend to hoard. I imagine the people in Jeremiah’s world are anxious and hoarding and only

focused on themselves – the universal human response. They have looked inward rather than outward, meaning they also have missed God’s help, which is what God is so frustrated about in this passage. They have turned away from God, and their ancestors before that also turned away.

God approaches the situation as if they are in a courtroom, and God is the plaintiff. In this time the court room case made sense. Now, in our time of court dramas and reality tv shows in court rooms and the injustices we see in the news every day, it might be less relatable in our own understanding.

The water metaphor still works well, I think. Every human needs water to survive. God addresses a time in which God, who is the Living Water, is rejected. No one sought after God or asked questions. This is a reminder that God encourages our questions and voicing our frustrations. It’s ok to shout out like the psalmists and ask God why something happens, or where is God in a difficult time. God can handle our anger and questioning, and encourages us because it continues communication with God. When we don’t communicate our feelings, our needs or questions or emotions aren’t given the chance to be understood, and a situation cannot be remedied. When we turn away from God and each other, we isolate and no longer can share one another’s burdens.

For the Israelites Jeremiah is addressing a very troublesome time. The people were dealing with international conflicts, as well as divisions within their own groups.¹ We know that the issue began long before the people Jeremiah addresses – their predecessors played a role in this, as well, and maybe taught this generational response. It can be very easy to separate ourselves from past generations – to think we are more evolved or more educated or that we didn’t participate in some sort of ongoing problem in the world. In talking about racism in our country it can be easy for white people to say, “My family fought for the north in the Civil War” or “my family never owned an enslaved person.” But we are connected beings. Even if we didn’t actively do these things, or our family members didn’t do these things, we are shaped by our predecessors and history and have the ability to break those unhealthy patterns. An inaction can sometimes be worse than an action. In Jeremiah’s words, everyone is being held accountable for the actions – those in leadership positions and those who are not.

This passage gives us a glimpse of who God is and how God acts in the world. God is a living source of water who also holds us accountable. God nourishes and protects and cares, and also expects us to keep covenants and be responsible. Grace is not cheap. The Gospel of Luke tells us that our God is a generous host who invites everyone. No one is excluded in these feasts. This invitation is not to be taken lightly, nor is the responsibility. Deep reflection of community and entering with humility and a sense of equity is part of the invitation. Jesus is telling the disciples that in the realm of God we are to participate as equals to one another, not assuming we are better or deserve a seat of honor. Theologian Emilie Townes suggests this is the difference between being the blessing and asking for the blessing.² In ministry, in life, in the realm of God,

¹ Fred Craddock, John Hayes, Carl Holladay, and Gene Tucker, eds., *Preaching Through the Christian Year, C*, (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, International, 1994), 386.

² Emilie M. Townes, “Luke 14.1, 7-14” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 24.

we enter together as community, and often I think those who are seeking the blessing become the blessing.

The Gospel passage also challenges us to think who we put in the place of honor. We might enter as equals but perhaps we elevate certain individuals to that preferred spot at the banquet. Sometimes elevating others can be just as harmful as expecting that privilege for ourselves. When we place humans on a pedestal, we will always be disappointed. We all fall short of perfection and make mistakes. Too often we imagine historical figures or leaders as amazing people, and the longer time goes on, the more robust their stories become, and they can appear almost god-like. How do we recognize someone's legacy and also respect and acknowledge their humanity?

No one is like God. Those amazing saints before us who have paved the way are people we cherish, but we know they are not God. We sometimes forget that we don't have all the answers and we have to pause and seek God's help. When we enter community as equals we remember that we are all fallible and are more likely to rely on God. We remember to cry out to God with questions, asking for guidance. As we figure out what it means to be a Matthew 25 congregation in this community and how we can partner with the community and the college, we remember that we don't have all the right answers, and we approach problems as a community. We will find that those we seek to bless are, indeed, a blessing already. We don't have the seat of honor because we approach the table with equity.

May we always seek God, admit our failings, approach community with respect and equity, and share the Living Water with all we meet. Amen.