

July 15, 2012
Pentecost 7

"Flowing Wells or Broken Cisterns"

JEREMIAH 2:4-13

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, all you clans of the house of Israel. ⁵ This is what the LORD says: "What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. ⁶ They did not ask, 'Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and rifts, a land of drought and darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?' ⁷ I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable. ⁸ The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols. ⁹ "Therefore I bring charges against you again," declares the LORD. "And I will bring charges against your children's children. ¹⁰ Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: ¹¹ Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. ¹² Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD. ¹³ "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

I am holding in my hand two water bottles. The one contains clean water that is still cold from the refrigerator. I can open it and drink it. This other bottle contains water that has been contaminated and polluted. It would be foolish to set this bottle of clean water aside and drink the dirty water.

At the time of the prophet Jeremiah people drank water from different water sources. Some of it was clean and some of it was not clean. Some of the best water came from springs, such as the Gihon springs that supplied the city of Jerusalem with fresh water. They also drew their water from dug wells that collected the water that seeped from the ground. Then there were cisterns, or large underground tanks that were dug in the limestone rock. They filled with rain water during the rainy season. The water in the cisterns was putrid and foul smelling.

In these words from Jeremiah we hear the Lord tell us how his people had forsaken him the spring of living water and dug their own cisterns that were broken and could hold no water. Human beings are the same today. They look for the source of salvation in themselves even though they are polluted by sin. They do not want Jesus the pure and perfect Son of God to be their fountain or source of forgiveness and peace with God. These words of Jeremiah hit home with us this morning. Satan will do everything in his power to lead us to prefer a variety of dirty and broken cisterns to the fountain of blessings we have in Jesus the water of life.

The pure spring of water

The Lord describes himself as the spring of living water. In Psalm 104 the Lord describes these springs that he gives us in this way: "He makes springs pour water into the ravines; it flows between the mountains. They give water to all the beasts of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst." One of my fondest memories of hiking in Glacier Nation Park when I worked there one summer is drinking from the springs that flowed from the mountains. The water tasted so good. Remember when God's people ran out of water in the desert. Moses struck the rock and brought forth water. I am sure that water was better than any bottled water we buy today.

When you look at the water flowing from the rock at the time of Moses, you think of how Jesus is the pure source of your salvation. Jesus described himself as the water of life. In John 4 he said, "Whoever drinks that water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." In John 7 Jesus says, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scriptures has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." God wanted his Old Testament people to stay focused on the Messiah, the Savior who be the pure source of forgiveness for the whole world.

How strange that God's people would give up trusting in him the water of life for their salvation and go after worthless idols. The Lord said, "What fault did your fathers find in me that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves." Following after worthless idols made no sense. God's people had a rich history of God's love and mercy that flowed like a powerful spring that produced blessings up blessings. He led them through the desert and brought them into a fertile land filled with fruits and vegetables, a land of milk and honey. Can't you see the Lord opening up the heavens and sending years and years of abundant rainfall on the land of Israel to make it the land of milk and honey, an El Nino type rain cycle every year? As a child I was fascinated by the Bible picture of the spies coming from the Promised Land with a bunch of grapes so large it had to be carried by two men on a pole. I saw the Concord grapes that grew in our garden and there was no comparison to the large bunches of grapes that came from the Lord who was like a fountain that kept pouring out one blessing after another.

This land that the Lord gave his people was the most beautiful place on earth, not because of the fruit trees and the cattle that grazed on the lush hills or the flocks of sheep that seemed to be everywhere. This is the place the Lord God chose his Son to be born and grow up as child and live the perfect life that we could never live, and die the perfect death on the cross for our sins. It was here in this land that Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. All the animal sacrifices of God's Old Testament people pointed to the perfect sacrifice Jesus provided for us the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Romans 5 says, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more." The Greek words say literally where sin flowed all over the place God's grace flowed even more to remove that sin. The source of our salvation that developed in that land is pure and perfect.

The Lord is astounded that anyone would forsake him, the pure source of salvation, and look to be saved by bowing down to false idols. The Lord calls these idols worthless. This is the same word used in Ecclesiastes, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless." By following worthless idols these people attached themselves to something

worthless and through that they became worthless.

In our Bible camp this past June we showed a slide of an idol from India. We asked the children what it was about this picture of an idol that is so scary. One boy said, "It is the way the eyes are looking at you." Idols look at you with demanding eyes and say, "I want you to bow down and serve me and then I will bless you in this life and in the life to come." God's people actually turned their back on the Lord and worshipped scary idols with names like Baal and Molech and Chemosh. The people in our neighborhoods do not have idols of wood and stone. The idols are more subtle such as money, or the blessings in life that are worshipped more than God, or believing in yourself more than God.

The other day I was reading about the Argentine ants we have here in California. These ants have the amazing ability to get along with each other and help each other instead of competing against each other. If I took some ants from my home and dumped them off here on the church property they would immediately join ranks with other ants to build nest and supply the queens so there can be more ants. If people could only learn from ants on how to get along better this world would be a better place. We can easily make getting along our idol or our hope or our dream on how we can be blessed in this life and in the life to come. I have heard people say, "My religion, or my idol, is the golden rule-doing unto others as you would have them do to you." The Lord says here in Jeremiah "They have followed worthless idols and become worthless themselves."

The Lord knows our hearts. He sees the corruption that flows from every human heart that makes us unacceptable to him. That is why the Lord established in the land of Israel, his Son to live, to love, to die and to rise again and become the pure source of salvation. Why would anyone ever want to give up the Lord and return to some false idol?

The broken cisterns

The Lord describes this return to idolatry as returning to cisterns that are broken and can hold no water. He says, "I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable." God's people turned a beautiful land into an ugly land by developing high places where they worshipped Baal and other false gods. In the morning they would worship the Lord in his temple, but in the evening, they would go up to the high places with the bread cakes for their goddess Ashtoreth whom they called the queen of heaven.

Where were the religious leaders who had the responsibility of calling the people to repentance? The Lord says of them, "The priests did not ask 'Where is the Lord?' Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols." What happens in our land when the Word of the Lord is not taught correctly? People quickly return back to the default position of believing they can be saved and be right with God on the basis of how well they perform and carry out their duties. They value their feelings for Jesus more than worshipping him as their Lord and Savior.

The Lord says he is astounded at how quickly his people turned their back on him and turned to the worship of Baal and other false gods. "Cross over to the coasts of Kittim,

send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has every been anything like this. Has a nation ever changed its gods (yet they are not gods at all) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror." It all happened so fast. Within one generation, only one generation after entering the Promised Land, the people turned against the Lord. It says in the book of Judges, "A new generation grew up that did not know the Lord." They drank from cisterns that were polluted and cisterns that held no water. History shows how quickly a whole nation and a new generation can forget the Lord and turn to their own religious ideas and beliefs or idols which are worthless.

Satan never approaches you by asking you to totally give up the pure water of life you have in Jesus for the dirty polluted water of trusting in yourself. He suggests subtly that there is nothing wrong with adding something you to what Christ has done to make it better. Would you want to drink from this bottle, if just a little of the polluted water was added to it? Christ plus nothing equals everything. Christ plus anything equals nothing. As we sing in the hymn, "My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus blood and righteousness. I dare to make no other claim But wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand." Oh, dear Christian, you are so blessed to have Jesus the water of life flowing forth in your life every day. Treasure that blessing and with the protection and help of the Holy Spirit who is your comforter, stay away from the broken cisterns. Amen.