

“What Am I Getting Out of This?”¹

Jeremiah 2:4-13

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***“My people have dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.”***

Jeremiah 2:13

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, hear our prayers as we seek the living water that comes from you; speak to us as we seek to understand your will in our lives. Amen.

Sermon Message

When I was growing up, I often heard people use old sayings to express something. There was one saying that went like this: “That bucket won’t hold water!”

Folks said this when they heard something that was clearly wrong or not true, or it didn’t have much hope of succeeding. A lawyer whose case wouldn’t hold water was not a good case, for example, or a coach who couldn’t come up with a game plan in a tight situation was not good at holding water – and so on.

Today, when people say things that are not true, we might say that, like that old bucket, they don’t hold water. There is an emptiness to what they say.

When we read the prophets of the Old Testament, we might imagine something similar taking place when the people fail to hold water: there is often this pattern of not recognizing who God is and what God wants.

It is a familiar script that we see throughout the Bible, with God loving the people into being, but then the people rebel and turn away from God, thus bringing upon themselves judgment; but then the people repent and return to God, allowing God to fill them with hope.

¹ Insights for part of this sermon came from *Homiletics Online* “What Am I Getting Out of This?” (August 28, 2022) at www.homileticsonline.com.

It is also a script we read about in New Testament as well, as churches break covenant with Christ, only to return to Christ after waking up from their sinfulness. Apostles like James and Peter, for example, discover this as they work among such churches: God's people have a difficult time holding water, especially living water. There is this capacity, even as believers, to abandon the Lord as the source of life – to forget, to forsake, to be their own worst enemy, so to speak.

Jeremiah's Case

In our passage today, Jeremiah is witnessing this kind of behavior as he watches how Israel has turned to other gods, or, as he puts it, “worthless things.” Like a lawyer in a courtroom, he makes the case against Israel's unfaithfulness. Indeed, he simply states how the people keep on walking away from God's promises.

In two damning indictments, he makes these statements: first, Jeremiah says, “My people have changed their glory for something else that does not profit them” (v. 11); and then, second, “My people have forsaken me, the fountain of living water; they have dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (v. 13). The consequences of these two evils will come in the form of exile, as the people go into Babylon.

Yet Jeremiah argues these points, noting how nothing seems to stick anymore, cracks are appearing; the people just keep on behaving in ways contrary to God, and Jeremiah asks, what are the people getting out of it all? What are they profiting from such behavior? The answer, of course, is nothing.

Our Struggle

But it is a challenge in any age, isn't it? What is it in us that wants to walk away from responsibility, from goodness, from God; that wants to deny the truth, that wants to leave home and spend our inheritance on wild living (Luke 15:11-32)?

I ask these questions because we all have this capacity, I feel, to sabotage ourselves, maybe by wild living, maybe by procrastination or lack of punctuality, blaming others, apathy, addictive behavior, isolation, violence, stubbornness bad communication. And so, like a parent watching a child throw a fit, we may want to ask ourselves, what is the payoff about behaving in these ways? Attention? Approval? Appeasement?

There is a hymn we sing sometimes that says how “our hearts are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love,” even after seeing all that God has done for us, saving us, leading us.

Maybe we have good intentions starting out, but we end up doing things completely opposite of what God calls us to do.

Perhaps you might remember how the apostle Paul struggled with this very thing when he wrote to the Romans, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate...wretched man that I am!” (Romans 7:15, 24). Paul has a conflicted self, torn between moving away from God and moving toward God.

I cannot speak for you, but I know I struggle with this: I set my intentions this way, and then I find out that I end up somewhere I didn't intend! And then, I ask myself, how did I get here? What is the old saying? The road to hell is paved with good intentions!

Idol Problems

In Jeremiah's case, it is not that the people have wandered from God per se. It is that *they have made the conscious decision to reject the God who loved them and brought them out of bondage, all for worthless idols; the priests, the rulers; no one knows God anymore* – a reminder (again) that the heart of the problem is always the problem of the heart, which, in this instance, is idolatry, or this propensity within us to replace God with other gods, with idols.

An idol, of course, is anything that you put in the place of God and God's ways; that you begin to follow or worship. An idol is what you feel brings you comfort, security, importance, protection, power, popularity, success, even worth. The problem is that these “idol qualities” are short-term. They don't last. They are worthless. They start out giving you happiness and meaning, but over time fail the test of truth.

I often wonder what we would call idols today: for example, have we made “sports,” or “entertainment,” into idols, celebrities and sports figures, or maybe coaches who make millions of dollars? The sad thing is that sports and entertainment, when properly put into perspective, can do so much good. I feel I can say that about my own life – so much good, so many benefits.

But what makes idols so destructive is how deeply embedded they are in our lives and culture, to the point that we don't even see them, or we don't want to see them.

I personally cannot help but think how our fascination with, if not glorification of, guns is a case in point. We have over 400 million guns in the United States, and I ask myself, what do we get out of it all? More protection? More justification for more guns? More conflict?

But it is not just “guns,” but the pathologies of social isolation and hate, along with a crisis in mental health, plus the influence of the internet that, mixed with guns, all together, creates a toxic stew, with no sense of belonging or responsibility to what is good and true.² And by good and true, I am talking about what is life-giving, or what can mend our brokenness, and not add to the problems that already exist.

It is why I invite you to pray and consider ways of doing “good” and of understanding what “good” entails, for the good in scripture is Jesus, or as Jesus himself says, God – only God is good (Matthew 19:17).

It is why I invite you to pray for goodness to prevail, to pray for goodness to breakthrough in our society, and not more death. I invite you to pray for those in law enforcement and education, as we go into a new school year. I know as a husband of a teacher, as a father of two children who teach in schools, I pray for their safety, for their well-being, and for the children's.

Years ago, George Will, from the *Washington Post*, stated that in a healthy society we typically ask the question, “What is happening here?” to address our problems. But then he went on to say that in an unhealthy society, we ask the question, “Who can we blame?” We look for scapegoats.³

Maybe, in light of Jeremiah's plea, we need to be asking another question: “What can we do from losing water, or from being so spiritually empty?”

Methodists have traditionally answered this question by practicing the means of grace, worshipping together, celebrating the Lord's Supper, praying for oneself and others, studying the Bible, fasting, and meeting together in small groups. By sharing in these means, as God's people, we can open ourselves to the living water of God. We can retain what God has poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit

² David Brooks, “Why Do Mass Shooters Do the Evil They Do? (July 7, 2022) at www.nytimes.com/column/david-brooks.

³ This quote comes from the PBS Documentary “Viral: Antisemitism in Four Mutations” at www.pbs.org.

(Romans 5:5). We can remain spiritually full by remembering that God is with us, that the Spirit of God is working in our hearts, to pay attention to what is happening, and to understand that there is redemption in Christ; that there is God's mercy and strength; there is life, not death, or as Kent Millard shared last week, there is hope.⁴

Closing Question

Indeed, I can't help but think that this is what Jesus has in mind when he converses with the Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel. The woman has spoken favorably of the water that comes from the well, but Jesus responds by saying that "everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again" (John 4:13).

With our own behavior in mind, Jesus' words communicate that the gains of such "well-water" are short-lived. But then he adds more when he says, "Those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty" (John 4:14).

Can this not be a sign about what it means to face the truth about ourselves, about what it means to hold living water, that sustained by Christ's presence and promise, we acknowledge who God is, above all else?

Can it be? Can it be?

I pray so. I pray so.

Don't you?

Amen.

⁴ Kent Millard, "Hope," a sermon preached at Grace United Methodist Church in Franklin, Indiana, on July 23, 2022.