

Jeremiah 2: 10-13 "Broken Wells" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/29/22

As my oldest daughter Mikayla starts the second year of law school, it is finally beginning to sink in that I could have a lawyer in the family, something my family has never seen before. Mikayla reminds me, however, that Mikayla will be the good kind not the greedy kind of lawyer to which I'm grateful. What this realization has done in my life has made me much more aware of legal proceedings and the justice system in our nation. Any time something involving law or lawyers crops up in the news, which these days is all the time, I'm intrigued and want to better understand the legal ramifications of certain actions or lack of action. The word "perjury" seems to have taken on a whole new dynamic I'm noticing, becoming far more acceptable than it used to be. For example, in one trial, a prosecuting attorney asked the defendant if he committed the murder in question. The defendant said he did not. The attorney then asked the man if he understood the penalty for perjury. The man said, "I sure do! I understand the penalty for perjury is a lot less than the penalty for murder!"

In our text today, we are given a scene much like a trial where God is taking the people to court and accusing them of wrongdoing. This tactic is an established style used by biblical prophets to provide reasons for judgment as well as consequences. The text resembles the words of a prosecuting attorney who says, "Without any reasonable doubt, my people have committed two crimes: They have abandoned me, the fountain of living water, and they have dug out cisterns for themselves, that can hold no water." There has never been such a thing as what we are witnessing, God says. The people have gone after nothing, after the fake, and therefore have become nothing, become fake. They have strived for matters of little consequence resulting in their becoming of little consequence. The word for nothing here is

the same Hebrew word used in Ecclesiastes 1:2 which means vanity. The Lawyer continues, “And secondly, the priests, rulers and prophets are also guilty due to their poor leadership and turning away from the One True God.” Even the ones who study God’s teachings do not follow God. The prophets are not speaking prophecies of God but of the Canaanite god, Baal.

We should take a step back to the beginning of chapter 2 which sets the context for the crimes. God begins by remembering how good things were between God and the people, when the marriage was new and in its honeymoon phase. Israel is spoken of as a bride and their relationship is sacred to both. But then in verse 9, the story shifts as God accuses the people of idolatry and mocking their claim that other gods are just as worthy. If we listen carefully in the celestial courtroom, we can almost hear the gasps of the heavens, of the mountains and the rivers who stand as horrified witnesses to the brokenness. Those who were supposed to lead the people into right living, who were to guide them towards making better choices, had become useless. It’s like the story of the man on death row who was about to be electrocuted for his crimes. He phoned his lawyer shortly before the execution time and said, “It’s almost time for me to go to the electric chair. You’re my only hope, so tell me what to do now?” The lawyer thought for a moment and answered, “Avoid sitting down.”

Besides abandoning Yahweh, the people have placed their trust in useless cisterns, cracked vessels by definition. With such broken vessels, they watch the precious water dribble out through the cracks and onto the thirsty ground, leaving the people of God thirsty and dying. This analogy the prophet uses speaks volumes to those of us who live in a semi-desert area. The seriousness of the California drought cannot be ignored any longer, despite the celebrities down south who insist on watering their plantations day and night. Our closer neighbors are

experiencing dried up wells necessitating bottled water and extreme measures for survival. We are beginning to understand all too well the reality of the situation much like the southern deserts of Israel. There, the average rainfall is less than a half inch per year and in Cairo, it isn't unusual for them to receive no rain at all for 2 years. Therefore, it was crucial in ancient times that systems be devised whereby water could be saved and stored for long dry spells. The simplest way was to dig a hole in the ground, but as any fool might realize, that is a very poor solution to the problem. Water has this way of moving to the lowest level, and without some way of stopping that movement, much of the precious liquid seeps right into the soil below the hole. Some enterprising inventor soon began to experiment with various coverings over the soil of the hole to prevent the loss of some of the water. A kind of limestone became the material of choice, and throughout the Middle East, there exist the remains of limestone-covered cisterns that served ancient folks in this way.

Yet, however well such a pool was sealed with limestone, however carefully the ancient technicians did their work, it was inevitable that leaks would occur. Water has its way of discovering cracks and it never fails to seep away through those cracks – we saw first-hand this reality a few years ago at the Oroville Dam. We can easily picture ancient Israelites going to the well for their morning water and discovering to their horror that the water had disappeared through a fresh crack, formed in the night. It is that reality that informs this rich metaphor Jeremiah offers. Relying on previous sources of water is not sustainable and even today, we are being confronted with the folly of trusting in our own devices over the long haul. Cracked cisterns, broken wells, are the result of reliance on limited human skills and knowledge, arrogant convictions that we can do it all, and a certainty that if left to ourselves, we can solve

all our problems on our own. Jeremiah reminds us that it is only God who can properly create and seal a metaphorical cistern; it is only God who can lead us into these uncertain times.

Our faith, like our world, succumbs to the failures of short-sightedness, greed, and individualism. In John, chapter 4, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman he meets at the community well, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” It is a plea to return to the living waters that God provides. When we read this story, as well as Jeremiah’s text, maybe we can hear the catch in the throat of the author, maybe we notice the tears from the author’s eyes in the heart-felt plea which is being made. Here, God is pleading with us, crying out to us to return from our ways. Here is our God, more merciful than judgmental, still loving us without hesitation and seeking to free us from all charges that we can be reunited once more. The offer is on the table right now, free and clear, from the Holy One who calls us to question where we have gone astray? We are asked to name the false gods who dominate our lives – are they consumption, power, political expediency, anti-intellectualism? Where have we turned from the living waters God freely offers and dug wells of our own? Where are we tempted to “own” the earth and control the future? For those who believe the Bible to be just an ancient document which has caused far more mayhem than it has brought joy and peace, we find truth in the words of Jeremiah and John that speak to our times and our circumstances with incredible poignancy.

In closing arguments, Jeremiah summarizes God’s case: Return to Yahweh, the fountain of living waters, the guarantor of justice, the defender of the righteous, the scourge of the

greedy and finally the lover of the whole creation. Worship the One True God, realizing as Eugene Peterson says, that worship does not satisfy our hunger for God, it whets our appetite. Drink deeply of that sacred relationship which is pure, refreshing, satisfying and life-giving. Come to understand that if we don't drink of God, we will drink of something else that will leave us dissatisfied, wanting, even choking and retching on the sand which overflows from our mouths. So come to the Fountain of Living Waters and drink freely of that which will truly satisfy. By the grace of God, Amen.