

2022 08 28 - Broken Cisterns

Scripture: Jeremiah 2:4-13 (The Inclusive Bible)

I grew up in a farmhouse in southern Ontario. Like many farmhouses in those days, it had a basement with a dirt floor, a combination wood and oil furnace and in the corner stood a large concrete pool or cistern. This cistern held rain water that landed on the roof of the farmhouse and travelled through the eaves and down the spouts into this large holding space in the basement. The water in the cistern wasn't safe to drink, but we used it for bathing, for washing our clothes and dishes. It was lovely soft water that made our hair feel great, kept our dishes shiny and our clothes clean.

How many of you have lived in homes with cisterns? Having a cistern meant that we could save our well water for drinking. The water in our farm well was full of minerals that gave it a wonderful taste but those minerals played havoc with our dishwasher, water heater and other appliances. In hot dry summers, we sometimes ran out of cistern water and none of us looked forward to washing our hair in hard water. Our cistern was a crucial part of life on the farm.

In the Middle East water is an even more precious resource. Since ancient times, people in Israel and the surrounding countries have had to learn how to survive in a land with a wet winter season followed by a long dry summer. In ancient days, the days of the prophet Jeremiah, the Israelites stored water in large bell-shaped cisterns that they carved out of the rock. They dug channels to direct rainwater into the cisterns. The cistern's bell shape, with a narrow opening and wide well,

protected the water within from contamination and evaporation. In some cisterns, chalk provided a natural waterproof seal, and in others, a lime plaster was used. The picture on the screen is the opening of an ancient bell cistern that still exists today in Israel. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-3/commentary-on-jeremiah-24-13-2>

The water in these cisterns was used by the Israelites for drinking, washing and all their other needs. In their harsh climate a cistern meant the difference between life and death. If a cistern was cracked or the seal was broken allowing the water to seep out, then families and their livestock would perish. A broken cistern was a tragedy. It was a hollow, worthless hole in the ground.

Today's scripture reading ends with the Jeremiah quoting God, saying:

For my people committed two sins:
they abandoned me,
the fountain of living water;
and they dug deep cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that hold no water.

The prophet Jeremiah is using the image of a broken cistern to describe the lives that the Israelites have created for themselves in their Promised Land. The scripture begins with YHWH asking,

What fault did your ancestors find in me,
to make them wander so far astray?
They pursued hollow idols and became hollow themselves.

This, of course, is a rhetorical question, YHWH (or God) did nothing to make the Israelites turn away. Once they got to the Promised Land maybe they just got a little too comfortable. It seems that their priorities shifted. During their journey through the wilderness, the fleeing slaves had turned to YHWH many times looking for help. They needed God as a guide to help them find their destination. But once the Israelites arrived in Canaan, it seemed that their need for YHWH disappeared.

Have you ever noticed that happening in your life? How in difficult times we turn to God for help, but in better times we forget or ignore the Loving, Compassionate God that got us there? I certainly know that has been true for me. It's easy, when times are good, to think we don't need God anymore. It's easy to turn to hollow idols instead. Idols like the accumulation of wealth or the building of power or even the scramble for fame, And when those idols don't seem to satisfy us, then we may turn to even less healthy idols like excessive eating or drinking or the use of drugs or gambling or social media to try to fill our empty souls.

One of the idols that the Israelites turned to was Ba'al the god of the Canaanites. Ba'al was known as the fertility god, and was also called on to bring rain, when needed. The Israelites were now farming and raising livestock for profit, so Ba'al became their idol of wealth and good fortune. Ba'al became more important in their eyes than YHWH. Who needs a God of love and compassion, a God of wisdom and guidance, when things are going well?

But the prophet, Jeremiah, called Ba'al the Worthless One. It's interesting to look at various translations of this particular scripture. When you do, you realize that the terms hollow, empty, and worthless seem to be interchangeable. Hollow idols are ones that leave us feeling like a broken cistern: empty, unfulfilled, joyless. They are the things in our lives that we think we need, things that we pursue and even worship that, in reality, have very little worth at all.

One of the books I've reading recently is called "Free – Spending Your Time and Money on What Matters Most." It was written about 10 years ago and it is the true story of a couple named Mark and Lisa Scandrette. They made the decision early in their relationship to live a simple life. They have raised their family in San Francisco never earning more than a single teacher's salary. They chose time and freedom over money and stuff. They chose God and relationship over wealth and status. It is a fascinating and challenging read. At times they had to make hard decisions about what they could or could not afford. But they have lived a joy-filled life while avoiding hollow idols and worthless things.

When we deeply and honestly look at our lives, we realize that true joy and fulfillment come, not from things or even accomplishments, but rather from relationships. We find joy and fulfillment in the love that we share with family, friends, and community. We find joy and fulfillment in our relationship with the land, the air and the water, with all of God's creation. We find joy and fulfillment in our relationship with the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the source of Living Water, the Essence of Love.

When we spend our lives worshipping hollow idols, when we spend our lives just scrambling for more, we are wasting our energy, we are digging broken cisterns that don't hold water. We end up feeling hollow, empty, and worthless, when in reality, we are all already beloved children of God. We are already all we need to be. We are enough, we are loved. All we have to do is open our hearts to that love and our inner-most cisterns will be filled with the Living Water, the Loving Spirit of God.