



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Seek Living Water”

The Rev. Lawrence W. Farris

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The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 2,4-13

I must confess that I have a bit of a soft spot in my heart for atheists. I know a few quite well, even count some of them as friends. What I like about them is that they often ask great and fundamental questions about life. And that can make for a lot more interesting conversation than that with folks who are sure they have all the answers and have stopped asking the essential questions.

When I first meet an atheist, I test his or her atheism by asking them to tell me about the god they don't believe in. It's a trick question, of course, because one can't describe something one doesn't believe exists. And if they do describe a god they don't believe in – because of bad church experiences or unexplainable suffering in life - I'm usually able to affirm that I don't believe in that god either, and then can begin a conversation that has on occasion led to serious engagement with the God we meet in Jesus Christ.

But a true atheist won't fall for my trick inquiry, and away the two of us can go to talk about how one constructs meaning in life and where a durable set of moral standards can be found and all the rest. The conversations are often rich because the atheist has often given such matters a lot of thought. They know what the essential questions of life are; they just don't see religion addressing them satisfactorily.

The lectionary does not often lead us into the riches that are the words of the prophet Jeremiah as it does today. Perhaps that is so because Jeremiah's words are often harsh, hard to hear, painful to accept, short on the hope and comfort and peace we yearn for in our life with God. And at times it pains Jeremiah to speak such truth, but he is faithful to his calling and proclaims that which God has laid upon his heart and soul. And we should be grateful for his faithfulness to his calling.

Jeremiah lived at a terribly difficult time in the history of Israel. A hundred years earlier, a regional superpower named Assyria had conquered the northern portion of the country and, in accordance with their policy of domestication of the vanquished, the Assyrians had dispersed the people throughout the Assyrian empire. Recently, the Assyrian empire had been succeeded, as all empires eventually are, by another superpower named Babylon. And Babylon had conquered what remained of Israel and carried off its rulers and leaders to Babylon, in accordance with its policy of domestication of the vanquished. So, God's people had been scattered across the Middle East because of conquest; some

had fled to Egypt out of fear; and some remained around the once great capital city of Jerusalem. It's been a long, dark season for the people of God.

We might expect that into the midst of such darkness and despair, God would speak a message of hope for the future. Certainly, that's what we, as well as God's people long ago, long for, but it was not to be. Jeremiah has the thankless task of proclaiming things are going to get worse before they get better. The prophet calls the people to use this dark time to think long and hard about where they've been, what they've done, and how they have damaged their relationship with God.

In the first place, says the prophet, the people's problems go way back in their history. Their ancestors, hundreds of years earlier, had turned away from God, and pursued 'worthless idols and became worthless themselves.' Now there's a caution. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann succinctly and rightly puts the matter, we become like whatever god we worship.

Jeremiah goes on to say the people stopped asking the right and important question, "Where is God in our life?" God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, nourished them in their desert wanderings, and brought them to the promised land. And how did the people respond? They started worshipping the local fertility gods of that new land - named Ba'al and Asherah - because they looked more promising. And there's another caution, I think, that we not rush to whatever seems to be working in the church next door without testing the spirits. Reformed and always reforming, yes. Openness to the new God is ever bringing to us, absolutely. These are essential parts of our heritage as Presbyterians, but we do not do so on a whim or without asking the question of whether or not the God who has long loved us is truly in the latest and glitziest.

It gets worse. Even the priests had stopped asking the question of "Where is God in our life?" Likewise, the judges and the kings and the court prophets. All chased after the worthless gods Ba'al and Asherah and found themselves morally and spiritually bankrupt. Wherever we may be, the culture in which we find ourselves will always offer us alternatives to the path to which we have been called in Jesus Christ, and if we don't keep asking, "How does this fit with what I know of God?", we can end up devoting ourselves to that which does not truly give life.

Our lesson closes with God giving a wonderful metaphor for the situation saying, "My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that hold no water." How I love to think of God as a fountain of living water; such a life-giving image of our God. But the situation seems to be something like this in Jeremiah's time: imagine a city with a lovely fountain in the middle of the town square, with water sparkling as it dances in the sun, clean and fresh, with more than enough for everyone. But as we look at this city, we see people with their backs to the fountain, each one digging his or her own cistern, a cavern in the ground in which to store water. It seems absurd to us, but there it is. The life giving water is right there, and the people have but to turn around - to repent, to use the old word - to receive it. And they just keep digging away. And to top it all off, their cisterns are all cracked and won't hold the very water they need.

You know what? I don't think we are those people. I think we're here because we know God is a fountain of life giving water, and we know it's that water we need. We even call this piece of furniture that holds our baptismal water a font, a short form of the word fountain. And we believe the water it holds is life giving. We're here because we do believe the God we seek is to be found here. We're here, and we have our children here, because we want to learn and share all the marvelous the stories of our God with us, from Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and Miriam, to Ruth and David, to Mary and Jesus and Paul and Lydia, to St. Francis and St. Clare, to Mother Theresa and Archbishop Tutu. We're here because a good part of us knows that there are a lot of ways to approach life that just don't hold water, that our efforts at self-sufficiency look a little silly next to the fountain of life giving waters. We're here because we long to drink deeply.

A father once watched his young son trying valiantly, but without success, to move a big boulder in the back yard. The father went out to ask his son how the job was going, and the son, practically in tears, said, "I've tried everything I can think of and as hard as I can, and I just can't move it." And the father said, 'You haven't tired asking me to help you.' We're here because we know we need help and know this is the place to find it. We've repented, I hope and pray, of the folly of cracked cistern digging. Why dig a hole that will fill with stagnant water awash with trash, bugs, and dirt when there's a fountain right here?

I need not enumerate all the cracked cisterns people in our day are pouring their labor into. You know them as well as I – rabid ideology, unending materialism, and all the rest. But I can ask that we be people willing to invite others to come to the fountain of life giving waters. It's not just a watering hole; it's a place where folks enter into community with one another out of the isolation that marks much of contemporary life. It's a place to hear the stories that inspire and encourage and reveal, the old stories of God's wondrous faithfulness and new stories of that same God's work in our lives today.

When I meet a belligerent atheist, he or she will often begin to enumerate the long historical list of the church's sin, folly, and hypocrisy as part of the attempt to deconstruct the faith by which I live. I stop them early on in this exercise to say that I am quite sure that I, as a well-informed insider, could do a much better, more thorough job listing the church's shortcomings. But then, if I sense I'm talking with someone whose questions beneath the surface are real, I tell them that for me, to be a Christian is to live by a certain set of beliefs and stories and practices and rituals and holy days that form a way of life. It is to live by an epic story – not an epic in the sense of something not true, but in the Joseph Campbell sense of a story that enables us to make sense of the world and our place in it. And then I ask the person to describe the epic, the myth, the stories, the rituals and practices by which they live, for I am persuaded that everyone lives by some set of these or another. It makes for interesting conversation, quite often. The wonder is we get to choose the story we live by. And we take care to choose well as we will be decisively shaped by the story we claim. As Jeremiah makes so clear: worthless story, worthless people. Life-giving story, life-giving people.

The people in Jeremiah's time had forgotten their stories. They chased after every new and improved god that they ran into. And in forgetting their stories, they not only forgot their amazing and faithful God; they lost their identity. They lost their relationship with the Lord and giver of life, and they

found themselves frantically trying to create cisterns, stories, theories, philosophies that finally wouldn't hold water. They were dying of thirst, not in the desert, but beside a fountain.

Our story is the story of a God whose reality and grace and love are always so much more than sufficient that they spill over into abundance. They are adequate for every circumstance of life from our moments of greatest joy when our hearts overflow with gratitude to our moments of greatest tragedies when meaning and hope seep out of us through every pore.

The people to whom Jeremiah first spoke had forgotten to ask where God was to be found. Where is the water that gives life? Where are the stories that tell us who God is and who we are? And in that forgetting, they were vulnerable to hundred distractions that told them they were sufficient unto themselves. Let us not be like them. And let us be thankful to our God for every moment we remember the right questions, and the place and the One in whom the answers are to be found.

Amen +

Sermon as preached may differ somewhat from this written text.