

Jeremiah, the prophet, might be one of those people who would like to change his time in history to another time. I do like western movies, but I don't really care for camping out and the people in the old West spent a lot of time sleeping on the ground and eating cold food. They took a bath, maybe, when they came to a river. I have no desire to change my time in history and live in the old West. I like my time in history just fine.

Jeremiah is called to be a prophet during the time when the Northern Kingdom, Israel, has already fallen. Judah, the Southern Kingdom is facing a similar fate at the hands of the Babylonians. King Josiah, the favorite king of the historians of Deuteronomy (Second Law) was killed in 609BC at Megiddo by the Egyptian Army as it marched through the region to support the Assyrians against the threat of the Babylonians. But the Babylonians had already put an end to the Assyrian Empire. The war was between the Babylonians in the North and the Egyptians in the South. Unfortunately, the small piece of land of the Israelites called home was the only way to get from the South to the North, or from the North to the South. Israel seemed to always make a treaty with the wrong side or maybe I should say, the losing side. So, they were victims of the victorious army – whoever it was. In 597, Israel was besieged and then captured by the Babylonian army. The first wave of exiles were carried off to Babylon. Zedekiah, a puppet ruler for the Babylonians rebelled against the Babylonians and in 587BC, the Babylonians leveled the walls of Jerusalem and the buildings, including the temple. The large wave of exiles were taken off to Babylon.

Jeremiah had the misfortune to be a prophet during this history. His interpretation of the situation is clear. While understanding the politics, Jeremiah speaks of the leaders of the people as the cause of this calamity that befell Israel. His speech in the text today is mainly a speech from God. Israel has turned away from God to "worthless things." They have forgotten that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt, led them in the terrifying wilderness and brought them into a "plentiful land" and fed them. By contrast, the people had failed to be faithful to God. They had forgotten the application of the First Commandment: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me." He actually says, "In all of history, can you find where a nation has changed its god?" The heart of the accusation against the leaders of the people is that they have traded their glory (their God) for something that does not profit (false gods.)

The leaders have failed Israel in two ways. The imagery is amazingly clear and it is powerful.

1. Israel has forsaken God. God is pictured as "the fountain of living water). In a semi-arid land, a spring of ever flowing water is the most important thing you can have. God is that ever flowing fresh water that brings life. Israel has forsaken God and followed gods that are no gods. God has brought them out of bondage. God has brought them to a good and plentiful land. God has given them the law to help them know how to relate to God and to each other. God has called them to care for each other, especially those who are helpless – the poor, the widows and orphans and the aliens. But they have replaced God with ideas of prosperity and have used methods that cheat the poor so they can have more. They have failed to be inclusive to those who need help in community.
2. And just what have they traded God – this ever flowing fresh spring of water – for? They have dug out for themselves cisterns "that cannot hold water." Through great toil and at a great price they have made these cisterns – artificial basins to hold water. But cisterns can only collect rain water. It was not water from an ever flowing fresh spring. It was only used in time of emergency. People would have to carry this water from cisterns a long dis-

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tance. In the cistern, the water was stagnant and it would be polluted. It could be used only to water crops. Over a period of time, cisterns would often crack and the precious water to water the crops would slip away.

If a thirsty person tried to get water from a cistern there would be great dismay. A thirsty person, coming eagerly to find water to drink would be disappointed when they found it broken and empty. And if water was there, it would be polluted and unfit to drink. For Jeremiah, it was utterly absurd to abandon God – this ever flowing fresh spring of water – for water collected in these cisterns they had made for themselves.

The prophet Jeremiah understood the decline of Israel because they had gone after worthless gods and thus they had become worthless themselves. What we worship is not without us, it is within us, it is in our souls. When our spirit is not related to God the fountain of living waters, we have a great emptiness. Jeremiah understood that going after other gods was to be deceived by values that do not bring life.

Growing up, one of my jobs was to go to the well and bring water to the house. If the well got low, I would have to go to the spring. It was about a half of a mile farther. I learned quickly to find a bucket that did not have a hole in it. As I grabbed a bucket to go get water, my mother questioned, "Will it hold water?" If I forgot and took the wrong bucket, by the time I got back to the house, I would not have much water.

I think of the systems we are building in America – systems, policies that we use to determine how we relate to each other in community.

Immigration policy.

War on Terror

Homeland Security

Unfair Loan Offices

Unequal School Systems

Laws that discriminate against the poor, people of color, people of different sex orientation

Well, you can make your own list. Are we –at great cost and time- hewing out for ourselves cisterns that are broken, cisterns that cannot nourish life?

Jeremiah is called the Weeping Prophet because his time to speak for God was at a time in history when his country had forsaken God – this ever flowing fresh spring of water in a dry and thirsty land, and had made for themselves cisterns that could not hold water and bring life to community.

My favorite Bible story about Living Water comes from the Gospel of John. The Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well. Jesus asked her for a drink. Her response was consistent with the culture of the day. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman.

How can you ask me for a drink?" Jesus answered, "If you knew the gift of God and asked,

God would give you living water. If you drink the water out of this well, you will be thirsty again.

Whoever drinks of living water will never thirst again." She answered for herself and for all of us today, "Sir, give me this water - this water from a ever flowing fresh spring –

so I will never thirst again."