

This morning's passage comes this morning from the mouth of God through our Major Prophet Jeremiah. Arguably, Jeremiah lived in one of the worst times for Judah. It would be during Jeremiah's lifetime that Judah and its capital Jerusalem would be captured, razed to the ground with the survivors being taken captive to Babylon, Both Jerusalem and Solomon's temple would be destroyed.

Last week we learned from the first chapter of Jeremiah about God's call to Jeremiah when he was just a boy. God did not sugar coat the assignment regarding what Jeremiah would utter in the name of God. From that point forward, Jeremiah would constantly be in danger. Jeremiah would live a life of rejection. Alone, standing against all of Judah's iniquity would be virtually impossible. But as Jeremiah would learn from God, he would not be alone. God promised to uphold and protect him during these times. And do you think God kept that promise?

Another reason why I have beef with the Lectionary. If we followed it, we'd start at verse 4. I want to start with the first verse because it provides important context (aka background). You see, Chapter 2 begins with God remembering earlier times in the wilderness some 800 years before the time of Jeremiah. God's tone is like that of a jilted lover. God sees those times like one of a betrothal. God deeply and passionately loved Israel. Israel was set aside for God. They were called to a life of holiness. Holiness that would be lived out with strong moral character. And back in the days of the Exodus Israel, despite all the troubles in the wilderness seemed to have some passion for God. In Jeremiah's day it was time to look back at Israel's repeated failures which were many. And yet Jeremiah says that in the present the situation in Judah and Jerusalem was much worse than this.

God had provided everything in the wilderness for her, a land that was wild and uncultivated. this proved God's love for Israel. Then Israel was brought into a pleasant land which was promised to Abraham. Israel should have flourished there. But they didn't. The history of Israel was a very rocky relationship with God. Yet God continued to try to repair this relationship. It was no fault of His that this relationship failed.

The situation got so bad that he had to divorce Israel, the Northern Kingdom. And He was about to divorce Judah as well. Jeremiah later will talk about a writ of divorce. The Greek word that translates the Hebrew here is “apostia” or apostasy in English. Jeremiah does talk about a later time in which Judah and Jerusalem would be restored, but the immediate future was that of judgment.

Jeremiah continues with the indictment of Israel. He tells them to hear the word of God. He challenges them to find any act of unfaithfulness on God’s part. He points out that any instance of iniquity or faithfulness was on the part of Israel. They had no cause to desert God. To desert the moral practice of God. To abandon God in the name of vulgar acts of vanity.

The Hebrew word “Hevel” here is used frequently in the book of Ecclesiastes. It has the meaning of “empty”, “dust” or “vain.” Jeremiah reminds Israel about the time they were brought through the empty wilderness to the promised land. But ironically when they entered into the Promised Land with milk and honey, they entered into the emptiness of Baal worship and became empty themselves.

Israel deserted God. It was God who provided everything Israel needed to thrive. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually. With all this, who did Israel go after? Baal.

We hear a lot in the Old Testament about Baal worship. Want to know a little more about why Baal worship was so despicable? Whew...thanks for asking for a bit longer sermon.

So Baal worship wasn’t much different from worshipping other gods of the Ancient Near East. Pretty much every culture had their own version of Baal. The word Baal means lord or owner. Baal was the god of cultures like Caanan and Palestine. Ancient Egypt served a god named Ra. Mesopotamia served a god named Marduk. Each story of how these gods came to be has a similar motivation...revenge.

The practices of worshipping these ancient gods in our modern terms are considered barbaric. Sacrifice was a definite ritual of worship here, as was Hebrew worship. The difference is what was sacrificed and why.

For the Israelites, sacrifices were of animals only. And the purposes of sacrifice was for cleansing and honoring the God of heaven. In other ancient religions, such as Baal worship sacrifices were not limited to animals. Humans, even children could be an offering to Baal. The purpose of the sacrifice wasn't just for cleansing or honoring Baal, it was also to plead for things like fertility. Fertility didn't just mean the ability to produce family heirs. It also referred to fertile crops and fertile livestock. And blood sacrifice wasn't the only requirement to ask for fertility. PSA...graphic content to follow. Sexual acts were also required. These acts were ideally with a virgin girl. If that wasn't available a boy could also be acceptable.

As heinous as this seems to be to us, that's exactly what was happening in Northern Israel and Judah. When we will hear Jeremiah say in verse 20, On every high hill and under every green tree you sprawled and prostituted yourself. These weren't just occasional practices, they were everywhere! Worshipping Baal gave them full license to commit immoral acts.

But here what God was trying to say. Religion cannot remain true religion if it bypasses genuine moral concern for the welfare of society. Let me repeat that.

God's perplexity is understandable. What could be more empty than for Israel to pursue a God that was no God. Pursuing a relationship with Baal was profitless. And the worst part about it was the priest. Instead of guiding Israel to God instead they guided them to Baal. The priests were worthless.

Next, God challenges Judah with some very uncomfortable questions. Find a nation that has changed their gods. These nations may be faithful to worthless gods, yet they were faithful.

Yet Israel whose God. Whose Yahweh is Lord over all the nations was deserted by Judah for worthless gods of other nations.

Thus Jeremiah declares the two major sins of Israel. Forsaking the fountain of living water and replacing it with broken cisterns which hold no water. Water was scarce in the land of Israel; water was prized like gold. Access to fresh running water was especially prized. Most Israelites had to either dig deep wells which often contained water that was somewhat salty, or worse yet, had to be stored in cisterns. Water from a cistern might sustain life but became stagnant. Plagued by the introduction of dead animals. Full of bacteria. Their water had to mixed with wine, an antiseptic, to even be drunk. But during the long and hot dry season, it preserved life.

Many of us would consider such cistern water to be virtually useless. But Judah's plight was even worse. The only thing worse than a cistern full of disgusting water was a broken cistern which was of no use at all. Think back to the wilderness in Moses' day, the Children of Israel wandered in this wilderness full of pits and lacked good water. Who provided water for them? God. How ironic that Judah lived in a land where water, though scarce at times, was comparatively lush. Yet they were dying of thirst. O by the way, there was water available in Jerusalem.

Ok great Pastor Amy but didn't these things happen more than 2600 years ago. What does this teach us today? Consider this. Our text today is more than a study of ancient history. The same LORD who sent Jeremiah back then is the same LORD today. He does not change. We also know that God has a special purpose for us, for our church family, for our community, even as He did then in Judah. And we have something they didn't have back then. Anyone guess who that is? Jesus. Jesus our Passover Lamb. It is Jesus who leads us through the wilderness of this world to a better Promised Land. God led Joshua to lead the Children of Israel across the Jordan into the Promised Land. We also have a Joshua (same as Jesus in Hebrew, Yeshua who is greater than their Joshua).

Jesus on the night He was betrayed told his disciples that he was going to prepare a place for us. Jesus calls Himself the living water, that anyone who drinks this water will have eternal life.

We noticed earlier that things started going wrong even during the espousal period in the wilderness, very wrong. Israel back then cried out that God had abandoned them there to die and desired to return to the good old days in Egypt. But God had not deserted them. Instead they deserted God.

So if we as individuals or as a church feel that we have been forsaken and our first love lost must realize that it is we and not God who have moved away. Even from the Garden of Eden, we see a picture of God who sought out Adam and Eve, to hold them to account it is true, but also to provide hope of redemption through the seed of a woman. Jesus Christ was that promised seed who left His throne above and came to earth and became flesh, who dwelt among us. Yes, He came to call us to account, but also to offer the hope of redemption, a redemption paid in His shed blood for our sins. God had provided everything for us, even in the wilderness of this age. We should be both thankful and hopeful. Let us keep this always in mind in the dryness of this life. the system of this world is as useless as the broken cisterns. Since Christ is the living and best water, let us come to Him and drink of this water. without this water, we will all die miserably of thirst. Saints, the only way is forward.