

Roots

Jeremiah 17: 5-13

Last week we talked about water out in a lake or an ocean, the deep water, we talked about fishing in the deep water. This week we're going to talk about ground water and the roots of plants. You might be getting the idea that water is pretty important in the Bible, and it is. I still remember my first day of class in Seminary, in the class called Introduction to the Old Testament, the professor said that the key to understanding the entire Old Testament was water. And he proceeded to tell us all the many ways that was so, from the geography of Israel, the coastline has very few natural ports and therefore did not foster the people of Israel as sea-faring folk like the Phoenicians. This led them to be more insular and fearful of outsiders from "the coastlands." He told us how the enemies of Israel: Assyria, Babylon and Egypt were associated and described by their great rivers: Pharpar, Tigris, Euphrates and the Nile. He told us how most of the stories, in some way or another revolved around water and/or lack of water.

It's all very interesting stuff, but here in the prophet Jeremiah, we're going to talk about water that isn't really about water, we're going to use the images of roots and irrigation, but we're not talking about trees and streams, really. The oracle begins with people who put their trust in mortals, which means most of us, most of the time. We, in fact, value self-reliance and admire self-confidence. We like to be in control and to have things go according to plan, and that seems to work out just fine, until it doesn't. The people the prophet goes after are the people who learn the ways of the world so well that they basically do not think they need God anymore.

The message resonates with Jesus' teaching as well, particularly in the beatitudes. Luke's version of the "blessed are" statements actually includes the inverse statements of woe. The woe comes to those who are wealthy and in control, woe to you when everything goes your way. No wonder Matthew is more popular, even if his version is challenging enough. I mean, it's hard enough to figure out how the meek and the mourning and poor in spirit are blessed, without also having to figure out how the rich and successful are cursed. But that's actually what Jeremiah is saying too. The ones who can do it on their own are not blessed, they will end up living in an uninhabited salt land. Their heart becomes devious because they think they can cheat and control things and they forsake the fountain of living water.

But let's stay positive here, who is blessed? The ones who trust in the Lord, and you might say the ones who have to trust in the Lord, who have come to a place where they know they have no other choice. They learn to sink their roots in deep, like a tree planted by a stream, they connect with a source that is not fickle or transient, it does not dry up when times get tough. A connection with the living water of God is not at all like the sources of water that come from "mere flesh." If there's a thing we need to understand about God from the Old Testament to the New it is that we are always being challenged to trust God. Remember how important love is? Well trust has a distinct and symbiotic relationship with love.

You can love things that you cannot trust, but that love tends to be out of whack. Some people try to love God without trusting God. They tell themselves that God is wonderful and marvelous, the king of kings, the Lord of Lords. They try to make deals with God, they attempt feats of righteousness so that God will bless them, they equivocate success and wealth with God's blessing, and they pretty much entirely miss the point of Scripture. God goes to great lengths to show that we can trust him. God's

grace to us does not run out or dry up. God actually picks the hardest situations and the last and the least to show that we can trust him to overcome and not just be a frontrunner. In this case, as it would be in any relationship, if trust is lacking, love, true love, is rather difficult.

The test of such love and trust is when the drought hits, when the catastrophe occurs. This is where the real measure can be taken, this is where the roots that we have in our relationship with God come in. And this is where so much of our false religiosity falls into the void. A God who we do not love, or we do not trust, will not be of much help when the “year of drought” hits.

This is a thing I notice as I go along this journey of faith, the more you learn to trust God, the more you see the benefit in the challenges of life. Don’t get me wrong, things still hurt, things still create stress on you, but you find that even in the tough times, the fruit is still there. It might be more attractive to say that faith will lead you into a life with no struggles and that God will just steer the drought and tough things another way, but that would be insane and untrue. What Jeremiah and Jesus both say is that, if you trust in God, you will find that even the storms are peaceful, and even the rough places are smooth, you will bear fruit, even when conditions don’t seem conducive.

The alternative, relying on “mortal” ways, may seem like it makes more sense, but it will leave you rootless and adrift when things go wrong (and they will go wrong). The Scripture, and especially the Gospel turns the things of the world upside down. As Paul says, “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are passing away.” Jesus shows us that, even in the most dramatic “drought,” where your life is poured out, your roots in God will bring you new life. Grow, as a tree planted by the stream of living water.