

Julina Rundberg
King's Chapel Midweek
March 26, 2014

Cracked Cisterns

Lectionary Texts: Jeremiah 2:4-13, John 7:37-39

Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate
says the Lord,
For my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water.

Today we find ourselves halfway through the Lenten journey, slouching toward Easter. We can no longer look back over our shoulders and see the mainland left behind, nor can we peer forward into the future to see the place where our journey ends. We are in the midst of spiritual wilderness this week, and echoing through millennia, from half-way around the world, we have heard the voice of a prophet. His message: God is angry with these people. These people have forgotten the God of their heritage, the God who led them through the inhospitable desert wilderness to the safety of a more abundant land. “They went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves,” says this God. They were in a bad place—in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives, and I their real and powerful God brought them home, only to be traded in for something less.

In this passage, Jeremiah tells us that God is angry with his people's, with their reckless self-invention, and their hubristic self-reliance. Folded within the lectionary texts today are narratives of God's grievances with us, narratives of the universal spiritual and maturational journeys of humankind. The voice of God delivered to us by the prophet Jeremiah in this text reminds me of a parent whose child has just begun the journey of adulthood—who perhaps is behaving badly after her first semester of college. There is love mixed in with hurt and longing—longing for a relationship that has grown distant, and ambivalence about this child's newfound experimental independence—a little pride mixed in with outrage. Soon enough that child will suffer too, for the pleasure of independence is soon tempered by disappointment. These transitional moments, when we look behind us to find that things have changed fundamentally, when we find that what lies behind us is irrecoverably lost and what lies before us is an uncertain future, these moments provoke in us the desire for reparation, for reunion, for retrieval. Longings like these are ever present in our human condition, perhaps never more than in the middle of the season of Lent.

I recently found myself telling colleagues at King's Chapel that although Boston is now my home, and although I love this city very much, I grow homesick around this time of year. Having grown up in Northern New Mexico, I remember desert and mountains as the compelling backdrop for the drama of the Lenten journey. Near where my family lives, thousands of pilgrims make their way each year on Good Friday to the Santuario de Chimayo, rising early, bearing crosses, and walking tens of miles, believing that their perseverance and faith will be rewarded at their destination—that they will be healed if they complete their travel to this historic sacred place. It is a kind of homecoming—a return to the well, where believers are refreshed after a parched, scorched, and penitent exertion. This pilgrimage, set against the austerity of the desert in early spring always seemed to me to heighten our sense of the value of life itself. Survival is basic in this context, and life is elemental. In the desert, people look to the skies in unison and pray for rain, knowing that if it doesn't come there will be fires tearing down the mountains by early summer; and at night, the wide unpolluted atmosphere peeks out into space at the milky way. In Lent, I long for the feeling of overwhelming wonder that fills the human frame, standing alone in the desert under the cold stars with a clear view of vast galaxies. This is the homesickness that visits me in Lent—the longing to return home, to be in that familiar landscape, and to be filled with all the familiar feelings I knew there. This is the symbolic Lenten journey each of us undertakes—through the desert in search of the well we once had, but have since lost. In Lent, we find the cisterns we have made for ourselves leak. We cannot hold the water of life. We grow thirsty. We seek, once again, beyond ourselves for a needed fountain in constant supply.

It is like this too with love. We may hoard up memories of home, of specific moments that were delicious, of time with friends who now live far away, of those dear hearts now dead and gone. But like a cracked cistern, in time our troves of stored up love run dry. The incredible protective withdrawal that keeps us safely self-sufficient in times of distress drains the succor of life together with others. Our fear of dependence, our selfish myth of independence, deprives us of life fueled by God's constant supply. When the cistern has run dry, as it may in the middle of Lent, we lose our sense of wonderment. When our cisterns have run dry it is as though, given a glimpse of the miracle of life, the incredible creative potential of nature captured in the very first signs of spring (yes even in the city), of crocuses forcing their way through the frozen ground toward the sun, we fail to see God's power, God's love at work all around us. The well is there, but we have not stopped to drink. We have forgotten where to find it, though we pass by it every day. In the middle of our Lenten journey, slouching toward Easter, there are hopeful signs of what's to come, if we can open our eyes and our hearts to take them in.

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water,".

In today's world I am often asked, "why church?" It's a perfectly good question. Life is full, people are busy, there is much to do. It is lunchtime in the middle of a busy work week. For me, and I hope for some of you, this practice—of prayer, word, and song—this observance, satisfies a certain human longing. Home is closer than we think, and we are almost there. On our way toward Easter, we remember where to find the fountain. Tap into the well that never runs dry, and become a conduit of living water. We have not forgotten God's love. When we remember this fountain in our midst there is always wonder, surprise at life, and love to share.