

Staying Hydrated

Jeremiah 2:4-13

8/28/2016

Chances are that some of you listening to the sermon on this the last Sunday of August have a bottle with you -- a water bottle.

Say "water bottle" and, if you're 85 years old, you might think this is a reference to a flat, red bladder into which hot water can be introduced, and which can then be taken to bed to warm up the sheets and body. Yes, this device (Google "red hot water bottle") was quite common in the first half of the 1900s when it was expensive to heat a house, and the cold nights and cold beds could be made warmer by use of the ubiquitous red hot water bottle.

But say "water bottle" to just about anyone else, and you know this is a reference to the even more ubiquitous plastic bottle containing water. If your audience is sporting a lot of water bottles, it's a sign that they fear that in the next 20 to 30 minutes they are going to be in dire need of hydration, and thus, are armed and prepared.

We see them everywhere -- these plastic bottles of water. In a recent year, Americans consumed almost 10 billion bottles of water. The average American drank 30.8 gallons, which translates into almost 170 disposable water bottles of which 38 are recycled.

Clearly, staying hydrated is an important issue -- but not just for humans.

Thirsty land

The tree rings tell the worrisome tale. Cross-sections of ancient redwoods reveal that California's present drought is the worst in 1,200 years. Shockingly low levels of rain and snow -- particularly the snowpack in the Sierra Nevada mountains -- are part of the explanation. Another factor is record-high temperatures that most climate scientists attribute to global warming. Add to that, a long record of poor conservation practices -- from thirsty suburban lawns to a profusion of high-irrigation crops like almonds -- and what you have is a perfect storm.

Well, maybe not a storm. A storm would actually be good news. Californians have high hopes that El Niño storms will eventually mitigate the water emergency, but experts say it would still take years of heavy rain and snow to fill the state's reservoirs to their former levels.

Whether this will actually happen remains to be seen. In the meantime, much of the American West is a thirsty land.

Thirsty people

We return to humans, now. We are born thirsty. We all need water to live -- every day, more or less. Generations past were content to drink just enough to slake their thirst, but today, health professionals are encouraging us to drink as many as eight glasses of water a day.

"Stay hydrated!" is the buzzword in fitness centers far and wide, and their patrons carry around the colorful high-tech water bottles to prove it. (Somehow, just saying "Drink plenty of water" is no longer good enough.)

It's a trendy, technobabble expression, stating a very simple truth the human race has known since the beginning of time: We all need water.

Staying hydrated, you would think, has never been difficult -- at least not since the days of leaning on pump handles and hauling buckets from the well. But, we often do make it harder for ourselves than we need to.

Most municipal water systems -- Flint, Michigan, and a few other decaying rust-belt cities being exceptions that prove the rule -- are notable for their high-quality water. Even some massive urban areas like New York City often win taste tests for their tap water. If that's true (and it is), then why is there such a frenzied rush to slug down exotic bottled waters? Brands like Fiji Water are transported on container ships, at great expense, from halfway around the world, offering no discernible improvement in quality (and in exchange for a deplorable carbon footprint). Sometimes bottled spring water is actually less healthy than tap water. Bottles filled directly from the spring can contain harmful microorganisms and chemicals that are routinely scrubbed out by municipal treatment systems.

Then, of course, there are the inexpensive bottled waters that don't come directly from the ground at all. They contain humble tap water from the community where the factory is located. Or, they're distilled water that starts out as tap water, is turned to steam, then is transformed back into liquid

form. Using such elixirs to stay hydrated is costly not only in financial terms but also from the environmental standpoint.

Thirsty souls

Many Scripture texts adopt water as a potent spiritual metaphor. Among the most vivid is Jeremiah 2:4-13, a courtroom setting in which an angry prosecutor-God thunders: "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."

Cisterns were a big part of daily life in the Middle East. This was a desert climate. There was no such thing as indoor plumbing. A cistern is an underground storage tank that collects runoff from the roof in the rainy season. The cisterns offered their accumulated supply through many thirsty days to come.

Cistern water is not especially appetizing. Today's hipster gym rats would turn up their noses at the malodorous stuff, which in no way compares with their imported bottled water. But that's not the point. Cistern water is strictly an emergency supply. Its only purpose is to preserve life in a time of terrible extremity. A cistern has just one job: to hold its water.

The water imagery would have been vivid for Jeremiah's readers for three reasons. First, they lived in a marginally fertile land, where crops were always at risk due to weather conditions. If the rains failed, if the wadis never filled with spring floods, then lives were at risk.

Second, the people of Israel had a vivid, collective memory of their ancestors' wilderness wanderings under Moses. God had once provided them with water from a rock. Based on their more recent experience, God was not likely to do so again.

Third, Jeremiah is writing at the time of the Babylonian invasion. Perhaps Jerusalem is already under siege. Perhaps, when the defenders opened their cisterns, they learned some of them were cracked, that precious water had already leached into the ground, never to be seen again.

There's a problem with the people of Israel, as Jeremiah sees them. They've not only failed to properly provision their capital. They've also failed to maintain the all-important cisterns of their spiritual lives. They've allowed

them to fall into disrepair. The people of Israel, the prophet thunders in judgment, are no better than "cracked cisterns that can hold no water." God's words of comfort and assurance do flow into them, but those precious blessings flow right back out again, to be wasted on the hot desert sands.

Repair the cistern

So, what's the solution to our spiritual problem, as God's people? The answer ought to be perfectly obvious: Keep the cistern in good repair! Faithful disciples must maintain a reserve of spiritual confidence, to get through times of suffering and trial. But how do we do that?

The best way to keep spiritual cisterns in good repair is by attending worship on a regular basis -- and especially coming to the Lord's table. Eat the bread. Drink the cup. Fill the cistern to the brim.

Do this often enough, and we'll learn that the chronic anxiety that's a feature of these troubled times has little effect on us. For we will then know, from long and oft-repeated experience, that it's not the investment performance of Wall Street, nor which political party ends up in the White House, that makes the greatest difference in our lives. It's the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This runs hard up against the conventional wisdom of our society. More and more, we Americans have become a people who value the quick fix, the instant solution. We'd rather pop a vitamin supplement than learn how to eat healthy. We'd rather blow a paycheck on some gimmicky exercise machine -- one that will inevitably end up gathering dust in the basement -- than embark on a sensible diet and exercise regimen. We'd rather try to solve our relationship problems by taking a magazine self-help quiz than by doing the hard work of seeing a counselor, over time.

God is calling us back

The same is often true of our spiritual lives. We coast along on our own devices, drawing water at will from those leaky cisterns, until we suddenly realize there's nothing left. Then, we turn to God in desperate prayer, craving an emergency refill.

We may or may not receive it. Last-minute may be our preferred mode of operating, but it's not God's.

It's not that God is ungenerous. It's that God's field of operation is decidedly long-term. Running beneath the surface of this text is the theme of covenant -- a reality measured not in days, but in centuries. The charge the divine prosecutor is pressing is that of breaking God's ancient covenant. Jeremiah's task, as prophet, is to call the people back to the sort of long-term covenant relationship whose dividends are realized in terms not of individual lives, but multiple generations.

That's a hard sell today. So many of us are spiritual individualists. We imagine we are the authors of our own spiritual destiny. We have a huge appetite for novelty and are apt to forsake ordinary cistern water for some trendy bottled import.

Yet, cisterns aren't filled to meet the needs of today, nor even tomorrow. The bottled water won't slake our thirst for very long once the supply chain is broken. In such dire straits, the cistern water, socked away for just such an eventuality, starts to look pretty good.

Stephen Covey's bestselling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, contains a memorable illustration called "Sharpening the Saw." Covey tells of two lumberjacks who are laboring hard to cut down a mighty tree using an old-fashioned cross-cut saw. Back and forth they pull the saw, their motions synchronized in perfect rhythm. Yet the longer they work, the less effective their labors appear to be. Each stroke of the saw seems to be taking less of a bite out of the tree trunk. But still the men keep sawing.

What they need to do is to stop and sharpen the saw. Yet there's something soothing, even hypnotic, about the rhythm of the sawing. The more exhausted they become, the easier it is to imagine that if they just keep going, they'll finish the job. "Who's got time to stop and sharpen the saw?" they think to themselves.

Yet, the irony is that if they would but stop and perform this essential maintenance, they'd be done in half the time -- and without the agony of aching muscles that comes of pulling a dull saw blade back and forth.

Worship is like sharpening the saw. Day after day, week in and week out, we saw away at our individual vocations. Without a regular interlude for worship -- for "being still and knowing that the Lord is God," for devoting time to prayer and contemplation, for hearing the Word read and proclaimed -- the bite of our labors becomes dull, and we become exhausted, stressed out,

detached from the wellspring of all meaning. It's not enough simply to confess Christ as Lord and Savior -- once -- and leave it at that. The saw needs to be kept sharp; the cistern needs to be kept in good repair.

The Lord has provided us with what the Protestant reformers have called the means of grace: Word and Sacrament. If we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, if we remember our baptism and partake of the Lord's supper -- and receive these gifts not just occasionally, but consistently over time -- we'll find they become part of our very nature. Then, our cisterns will always be full. Then, we'll know we are blessed -- even in anxious times.

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In today's scripture God tells the people the consequences of what happens when we forget the Lord and rely on our own resources.

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Common English Bible

Listen to the Lord's word, people of Judah, all you families of the Israelite household. This is what the Lord says:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that made them wander so far?
They pursued what was worthless
and became worthless.

They didn't ask,

“Where's the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us through the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and ravines,
in a land of drought and darkness,
in a land of no return,

where no one survives?"
I brought you into a land of plenty,
to enjoy its gifts and goodness,
but you ruined my land;
you disgraced my heritage.

The priests didn't ask,
"Where's the Lord?"

Those responsible for the Instruction didn't know me;
the leaders rebelled against me;
the prophets spoke in the name of Baal,
going after what has no value.

That is why I will take you to court
and charge even your descendants,
declares the Lord.

Look to the west as far as the shores of Cyprus
and to the east as far as the land of Kedar.

Ask anyone there:

Has anything this odd ever taken place?
Has a nation switched gods,
though they aren't really gods at all?

Yet my people have exchanged their glory
for what has no value.

Be stunned at such a thing, you heavens;
shudder and quake,
declares the Lord.

My people have committed two crimes:

They have forsaken me, the spring of living water.

And they have dug wells, broken wells that can't hold water.

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of this
holy word.