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## *Cracked Cisterns and Living Water*

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### **A sermon by the Rev. Wallace Marsh**

One month ago today, at the request of Mary Hunter Rouse, a group of us on staff attended a three-day training on Godly Play, the curriculum we use in our children's program. I signed up for the workshop because I wanted to be able to articulate Godly Play to young families and new members. Today, I can tell you more than you ever wanted to know about Godly Play. I can also tell you that I am extremely impressed by Mary Hunter Rouse and our children's program.

On the second day of our training, we were split into small groups and assigned stories. I was up first. I had an hour to memorize and rehearse the story with my small group before telling it to the large group. I am not sure what our instructors were thinking, because they put Canon George Maxwell and me in the same small group. We could have gotten in a lot of trouble.

As I tried memorizing my story, George sat in front of me with the script, cuing me when I needed help with one of the lines or was supposed to move one of the props. About thirty minutes into the exercise, I was getting frustrated and not making much progress memorizing my story. Yes, I confess to saying a few words that should not be uttered in a Godly Play circle.

Sensing my frustration, coupled with the fact that he had been telling me every line of the story, George Maxwell offered to spare me the humiliation by swapping stories. I thanked him but declined, because I am a very stubborn person! I was going to tell that story, even if I had to use George as a teleprompter. Thankfully, when it came time to perform, I got into the story and remembered my lines. (Well, we probably need to ask George,).

Why am I telling you this? The story that I was assigned to tell was the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple and Israel in Exile! It is the story found in the book of Jeremiah. It is a story that we heard last week, we hear it again this week and will hear it for the next 7 weeks in our Old Testament Reading. It is about a people that God loved and delivered from slavery. God led them into a land of prosperity and they never reciprocated that love; instead, they set their hearts on the things of this world.

Jeremiah says, "They searched after worthless things and became worthless." Thus, he accuses them of "two evils: They have forsaken God, the fountain of living water and they have dug out for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13)

Jeremiah comes from the word *jeremiad*, which means thunderous denunciation. He is called the prophet of wrath and lived up to that name. Jeremiah denounces everything and everyone "from the king to the clergy, from the rich and poor, from recreational activities to sexual behavior. Jeremiah leaves no stone unturned.

In chapter 4, Jeremiah says, you people talk about circumcision and being a part of God's chosen people. Jeremiah says, you people need to circumcise your heart; show you're a chosen people by loving God and your neighbor (Jeremiah 4:4). In chapter 7, Jeremiah runs up the steps at the Temple and yells, "This is the Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord,

The Temple of the Lord" (Jeremiah 7:4).

Jeremiah hoped the people might listen, turn from their ways and return to God. But the people did not respond. Actually, the people did respond, and here is how they responded!

When Jeremiah told them the Babylonians were on their way to destroy Jerusalem, they responded by throwing him in jail! When the Babylonian army eventually came and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, Jeremiah started to speak again. This time Jeremiah said, "I told you so. Now God wants us to submit to the Babylonians." The people responded a second time "by throwing him in a cistern of water hoping he would drown.

Fortunately, the cistern was cracked and Jeremiah spent a few days mired in the mud before being pulled out by an Ethiopian eunuch.

Allow me to take a dramatic pause and assure you we don't tell all these violent details in Godly Play, but we do tell the story!

We tell them this "Many lives were lost, the walls of Jerusalem had fallen, the Temple (God's dwelling place) had been destroyed and those who were left were now slaves, sent into exile! And in Godly play, we march the people across the desert box; it is a moving and painful moment in the story.

Now back to the PG-13 script. Guess who went with them as they traveled through the desert? Jeremiah! You do not want Jeremiah as a traveling companion on a long road trip through the desert! He doesn't know when to shut-up.

As they looked back and saw the destruction, Jeremiah said things like, "God is going to send us back there someday. We will rebuild" (paraphrase 33: 7-8). He went on to say, "God has not forsaken us. God is going to write a new covenant in our hearts and he will forgive all our sins" (Jeremiah 31: 31-34). It all seemed ridiculous to the people and by the time they got to Egypt, legend has it, they had heard enough and stoned Jeremiah to death.

That's what we do to prophets. We jail them, torture them, and when they keep on talking we kill them.

As a nation, we were reminded of that this week. It was 50 years ago this week, a 34 year old pastor (just a few months younger than me) stood in the shadows of the Lincoln Memorial to confront the sins of our nation.

We treated Martin Luther King Jr. like the people of God treated their prophets: We jailed him, beat him, bombed his house, stabbed him and ultimately used a bullet to silence his words.

We didn't celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech this past week because we were eager to remember our sins. We celebrated that speech because it was an inspiration, a vision; it was (and still is) a dream.

Old Testament Scholar, Walter Brueggeman says prophets are dreamers. Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel are all dreamers. It is as though God has given them a glimpse God's heart.

Jeremiah sees a new covenant, a covenant that God will make in our hearts, one that involves forgiving us of our sins. Jeremiah was given a glimpse of God's love in Jesus Christ. If prophets are dreamers, given glimpses into the heart of God, the final paragraph of the speech Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the night before his death. It will give you chills,

King said:

*Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!*

And like the prophets of old, the next day King was silenced.

Yes, the prophets want us to see our sins. They call out our shortcomings and make it personal. That is why we kill them. Yet, the prophets aren't motivated by some twisted self-righteous indignation. They simply want us to see that the world we create, the world we construct, is broken. It is a cracked cistern!

Prophets want us to drink from the fountain of living water. Prophets want us "taste and see the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). Prophets want you to ask yourself, where is God in my life? Ask yourself that question: Where is God in my life? What am I chasing after? Is my cistern full of living water or is it cracked?

Prophets point us toward the living waters of life.

The prophet Jeremiah shows us that when you drink from the living waters there is such a thing as hope when everything in your life is crumbling and you are in exile.

Martin Luther King, Jr. shows us that when you drink from the living waters there is no fear in the face of suffering and death. You can actually stand before it and experience joy, happiness and peace because you are confident in the glory of the coming of the Lord!

Prophets want us to drink from the fountain of living water.

Remember the fourth chapter of John's gospel? When Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at the well? If you remember her story, you recall that she had a difficult life; things weren't going well, her cistern was cracked! Amidst their exchange, Jesus tells her that he can give her living water.

Her response is beautiful. It is one of my favorite verses in all of Holy Scripture. Today, I pray that her words will be true in our own lives. She says: "Lord, give me some of that living water, so that I may never thirst again" (John 4: 15) AMEN.