

Cracked cisterns

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Richard Lischer [suggests](#) that one of the ways to organize a sermon is around a “master metaphor”—that key image on which the sermon’s progress and structure can hang. More often than not, the scripture passage itself gives us the master metaphor.

If it’s difficult for listeners today to connect with the Bible’s injunctions against idolatry because our own idolatry looks so different, the metaphor of God as “fountain of living water” being forsaken for self-dug, cracked cisterns is striking. It’s a memorable image to help us grasp what it means to exchange the glory of God for something that does not profit.

Thomas Merton [talks about](#) humanity’s “Promethean Theology”—our tendency to try to steal from God our own truest selves, our own perfection. The irony, he says, is that this is exactly what God wants to freely give us in giving us God’s own self. This is a self-centered spirituality,

the rebellion of a Promethean soul who is trying to raid heaven and steal the divine fire for its own glorification. What Prometheus wants is not the glory of God but his own perfection. He has forgotten the terrible paradox that the only way we become perfect is by leaving ourselves, and, in a sense, forgetting our own perfection, to follow Christ.

“Digging leaky cisterns” is not a bad image for the kind of idolatry that seeks to grasp and cling to the soul’s own perfection. The only cure is “leaving ourselves” and receiving God’s life as from a free-flowing fountain.

Another direction is to connect the digging of leaking cisterns to the environmental crisis and the United States' dependence on fossil fuels. In 2010, BP's Deep Water Horizon oil well exploded and spilled millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Our dependence on oil for our economy, luxury and security is certainly a kind of idolatry that Jeremiah would denounce. The homiletical challenge is to translate the good news of God's being a "fountain of living water" in relationship to our creation-destroying thirst for oil.