

IS THERE A BALM IN GILEAD?

TEXT: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

As I began preparing today's message on Wednesday, the Seattle Times headline tells me that a 20-year old is being held in the King County Jail on two million dollars bail for shooting and killing one and injuring two others in the Westlake Rail Station. According to *Gun Violence Archive*, as of September 18, there have been 40,301 incidents of gun violence in the United States, resulting in 10,680 deaths and 21,235 injuries. Our nation is reeling from shockwaves of violence, intolerance, anger, suspicion, and fear. At this moment it feels like our whole country is a powder keg, about to ignite, fueled by long legacies of racism, xenophobia, heterosexism, religious intolerance.

Back in the 7th century BC we hear Jeremiah say: "My joy is gone. Grief is upon me. My heart is sick. Hark, the cry of my people from far and wide in the land. Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?...For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician here? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? Oh that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!"

Jeremiah was dismayed, and perhaps even disgusted, that the condition of the people of Gilead had gotten so bad. The people were wounded from their sins and idolatries and needed to be restored. After their captivity, when Israel took the promised land, Gilead, on the west side of Jordan, became part of their land. The balm trade then became a huge business. It seems that one of the trees there secreted a turpentine-like resin that was highly sought after. It is said that this balm was worth twice its weight in silver. So Jeremiah's question was: "How can a people who traded in balm be so sick?" Of course, it was even worse than that – this is the physical illustration of a spiritual point. The real question behind the illustration was: How can the people of God, with the Law in their midst, be so sinful?

So, what about this balm that was so healing? The healing balm of the balsam tree was plentiful in Gilead. There were physicians throughout Gilead who could heal all sorts of illnesses by applying this balm to the physical hurts of the people. It appears that, yes, Jeremiah is crying the lament, but he is reflecting the feelings of God. Both God and the prophet are deeply affected by the disaster that Israel is going through in the Babylonian onslaught.

Into the midst of the sharp expressions of these emotions comes the question: Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Of course the questions are rhetorical: yes, there is balm and, yes, there are physicians there. But, it is implied, they are powerless to restore health to patients with their kind of illness. And the question, of course, is “Why?” There are no conventional healing methods available for what ails Israel. It becomes evident in later chapters that only God can provide healing for Israel.

Yesterdays *New York Times* ran the headline “Mass Shootings Keep Happening”. The sub-headline was “This summer alone, 26 mass shootings left 126 dead.” They were octogenarians shopping at a Texas Walmart. They were family members watching TV in California. They were late-night revelers standing on a crowded Ohio sidewalk. They were casualties of a violent summer. During the unofficial summer season, between Memorial Day and Labor Day, America endured 26 mass shootings in 18 states. One massacre followed the next, sometimes on the very same day. In sudden bursts of misery, they played out in big cities, along rural roads, inside trim suburbs. They left behind shaken neighborhoods, tearful memorials and calls for change, but little concrete action.

It becomes evident that only God can provide healing for Israel. In Paul’s letter to Timothy he identified God’s purpose as deliverance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”, he says, and “God desires everyone to be saved”. We know that God longs to rescue us from undesirable circumstances.

There are undesirable circumstances throughout our world today. The gun violence that pervades our country is matched by the hatred and fighting throughout

God's creation. As dictatorships vie for supremacy throughout the world, God's children suffer from needless alienation, persecution and forced exile from their ancestral homes. Where are they to find Gilead today? Where is the balm that will heal them?

This is not a new phenomenon. From the time of Jeremiah when the Israelites were being persecuted by the Babylonians, to the genocide of thousands in Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia and Hertzegovina, and the current mass exodus from Latin America, crimes against humanity have been rampant. Countries around the world vie to create more and more weapons of mass destruction to try to stay one step ahead of their real or perceived enemies.

I am reminded of a catchy song that was introduced by the Kingston Trio in 1959. Written by Sheldon Harnick, it's lilting but caustic lyrics described a world similar to the one Jeremiah lamented so long ago. It sounds humorous, but the words speak to a world in need of balm – that is “b-a-l-m”, not “b-o-m-b”. Here it is:

They're rioting in Africa
They're starving in Spain
There's hurricanes in Florida
And Texas needs rain

The whole world is festering with unhappy souls
The French hate the Germans, the Germans hate the Poles
Italians hate Yugoslavs, South Africans hate the Dutch
And I don't like anybody very much!!
But we can be tranquil and thankful and proud
For man's been endowed with a mushroom-shaped cloud
And we know for certain that some lovely day
Someone will set the spark off
And we will all be blown away!!

They're rioting in Africa
There's strife in Iran
What nature doesn't do to us
Will be done by our fellow man.

This song would indicate that there is no longer any balm in Gilead. There indeed is no physician there. What are we to do, here in our own place, in our own time, in our own discordant world? No conventional healing methods are available for what ails our world. As it became evident in Jeremiah's world, it must become evident in ours, that only God can provide healing for the ills that plague us

Jeremiah realized that the people were, indeed, seeking healing from God, but only on their own terms, in the place and time of their own choosing, and without sincere repentance. But the message is clear and straightforward. The people have sinned, they have persistently refused to repent, and they will die because of their willfulness. And so the prophet weeps. And in doing so he reveals a God who also weeps.

Jeremiah's text clearly reveals a depth to the character of God in the Old Testament that goes far beyond anger and judgment. Here is a picture of God that is very close to what we see of the same God revealed in Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus sat on the hillside outside Jerusalem and wept over the city only a few days before the people of that city would kill him, here God weeps with the prophet at the failure of his people. In today's reading we have not just a glimpse into the broken heart of Jeremiah, but a glimpse into the broken heart of God.

We live in a world that in many ways is not far different from Jeremiah's. The problems with which Jeremiah wrestled sound very up to date. We continue to live in a world of hatred, fear and violence. But we live in a world where God continues to seek reconciliation for all of God's children, even in the far-flung corners. We have come to know our God as one who cares not only for God's creation, but for all the life that inhabits it. A God who creates the joy of life. A God who weeps when that life has lost the joy of the abundant life it is intended to have. We, as Christians, as recipients of God's unmerited grace, who claim to serve a God who defines himself as "love", must also weep for those who suffer.

Despite the news that bombards us daily with tales of indiscriminate shootings, genocide, threats of war capable of annihilating the world, today's reading gives us a latent hope, in the divine/human questions our text asks. As long as there is balm in Gilead, and as long as there are physicians who can restore health, the human community has the ability to receive God's healing and transformation. Even in the rubble of traditions that no longer help us to explain our current dilemma, there remains the hope that a people could turn and return to God. This spirit of transformation can be found in

the great spiritual that takes the lamenting question and turns into a declaration of hope:
“There IS a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.”