

Is There a Balm in Gilead?

September 18, 2016

Dr. Frank Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee Florida

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

My joy is gone, grief is upon me,
my heart is sick.

19 Hark, the cry of my poor people
from far and wide in the land:
“Is the LORD not in Zion?
Is her King not in her?”
 (“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images,
with their foreign idols?”)

20 “The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved.”

21 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 there?
Why then has the health of my poor people
not been restored?

9:1 O 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!

IS THERE A BALM IN GILEAD?

We’ve talked about the historical background for the prophecy of Jeremiah these past few weeks so I’m not going to belabor it.

Suffice it to say that Judah will soon be taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

The Temple and her land will be laid waste.

There are several reasons for this.
The society has become bankrupt morally.
The country has come to trust in strong men and military might instead of God.

And finally, they have even started to worship “other gods.”

But, the prophet is not happy about the message of judgment he preaches. In fact he wants his people to be cured of their “warring madness.” And so in our lesson for today he asks a question.

“Is there a balm in Gilead?”

Now in order to answer that question we have to know two things.

First, what is a balm?

That’s spelled b-a-l-m (not b-o-m-b as our young people used to mistakenly think).

And it’s an ancient ointment taken from the sap of a tree. It was used to treat wounds, and also make perfume.

In other words, it’s sort of like Ben Gay with a better smell.

The second thing that we need to know is this: Where is Gilead, and why is it important?

Gilead was a place in ancient Judah, and it was important because it was renowned for it’s medical care.

Gilead was Florida Hospital in the ancient world.

If you were really sick, you went there.

They had all the best doctors.

So, to put today’s lesson in a modern context we might ask,

“Is there a doctor in the house?”

Is there some medicine that can cure what ails us?”

MORE THAN A BAND AID

Well, the answer is “that depends.”

We can cure many diseases.

But, there are some diseases, at least right now, that are beyond our ability to cure.

And that's true for the people of Judah.
God's people have a sickness that cannot be healed by the doctors in Gilead.

You can't put a band aid on it.
There is no pill that can make them feel better.
They need something better than Ben Gay.

God's people have a more serious illness.
They have a disease that is resistant to cure.

According to Jeremiah, all the ointment in Gilead won't help.

What God's people really need is a heart transplant.
Instead of a heart made of stone, then need a heart made of flesh and blood.

They need to have God's word written on their heart.
That's what will really cure them. (Jeremiah 31:33)

Fortunately, Jeremiah knows a good surgeon.
The Lord who created heaven and earth can give them a new heart.

But, before the physician can appear, the people have to understand the depth of their problem.

They can't deny that they're sick and try to "power through" under their own steam.

They have to repent.
They have to go in a different direction.

That's the balm in Gilead.
That's the healing ointment for the soul.
Repentance heals the sin-sick soul.

NO REPENTANCE

But, right now God's people don't have a clue.
Their world is falling apart, and they don't know why.

They ask,
"Isn't God on our side any more?"
"Isn't our king on the throne because God put him there?"

Well, actually the answer is "no".

God answers their question with a question.

"Why have you provoked me to anger with your worship of graven images,
of foreign idols?"

The key sin of God's people is idolatry.
They have decided to worship something other than the one true God.

God and God's word is not present in their hearts.
And so it stands to reason that God is not in their nation either.

Jeremiah put it this way,

"The harvest is past, and it was a very bad year."

God's people did not produce the fruit of repentance.
And so they are headed for a bleak winter.

Judgment is surely on the way.

MY JOY IS GONE

But, the prophet also makes it plain that he is not happy about the message
he brings.
He says, "My joy is gone."

I used to do intake evaluations for a mental health center. And if someone
told me that their "joy was gone," I would perk up and take notice.

This is a sign of depression.

And the warning signs of depression just keep on coming.

Next he says, "Grief is upon me."

Grief is the wet blanket that takes the joy out of life for Jeremiah. It covers everything he does and says.

And finally, Jeremiah says that his "heart is sick."

For me this is the most graphic way to talk about depression. When we are depressed, we are heart sick.

When I read Jeremiah's words, I think of the words of the Psalmist who cried to the Lord in despair,
"Restore the joy of your salvation ..." (Psalm 51:12)

This could very well be the cry of the prophet, but at this point he sees no hope.
He is overwhelmed with a sense of despair.

Jeremiah does not "preach down" to his people.
The prophet does not have a sense of self-righteousness.

He does not say, "You people are going to get what you deserve."

Instead, Jeremiah identifies with his people.
He hears their cry, the cry that comes from "far and wide in the land."

He is saddened because they do not have God in their lives any more.

But, Jeremiah, at least at this point, is not sure what to do. In fact there is nothing to do except share his people's grief.

He says, "My poor people hurt, and I hurt."

There is no quick cure for this self-inflicted wound.
There is no balm in Gilead.

There is no easy fix for the problems faced by God's people.

NO TRUTH, NO PEACE

In Jeremiah 8:11 we can read about why the people have been wounded so deeply.

Their leaders refused to tend the wounds of their nation by telling them the truth.

Instead, they said, "peace, peace when there was no peace."

In those days, truth was the first casualty of war and politics. Leaders told the people what they wanted to hear in order to stay in power.

(That sounds vaguely familiar doesn't it? Some things never change I guess.)

But, you can't treat a deep wound by ignoring it or just putting on some ointment and a band-aid. If we are deeply wounded more radical treatment is required.

Do you know why some of us don't go to the doctor as much as we should? We don't want to know the truth.

So, we put it off.

We leave deep wounds and illnesses untreated.

And, of course, this can cause big problems down the road.

Well, the same is true when it comes to our spiritual life. We often ignore our spiritual problems until some big event forces us to look at our lives in a new way.

Last week we vowed to remember 911, the people who were lost in the attack, and the service men and women who were killed responding to that attack.

The thing that really amazed me about the attacks of 911 was how people wanted more than just a political and military answer to that attack; they also wanted a spiritual answer.

The media asked religious leaders from all over the country to respond to those attacks and bring a word of comfort as we tried to make sense of what was happening to us.

The pews were full the Sunday after the attack.
It was like Easter Sunday.

And the people were essentially asking the same question that Jeremiah asks in our lesson for today.

Is there a balm in Gilead?
Is there a cure for what ails us?
Is there a word of comfort in this time of uncertainty and fear?

Many answers were given and many things have been tried since that fateful day.
But, there has been no cure.

The problems of hate and fear and terrorism are still with us. And we are still uncertain and fearful.

I wonder if we spiritual leaders might have failed the people these past few years.
Maybe, like the leaders of old we proclaimed peace when there was no peace.

Maybe we wanted to move too quickly from the story of the Exile to the story of the return to the Promised Land.

The spiritual wound has not been treated.
The anger and the prejudice and the misunderstanding that created the crisis is still with us.

HOPE IN THE TEARS

Like Jeremiah, I have no answers to the problems that we face, both individually and as a nation. I would be foolish to preach peace when there is no peace.

On the other hand, I do think we can preach hope.

There is hope in Jeremiah's message.

Yes, things are looking bleak for Judah.
The Babylonians will soon take them into Exile.
In fact, the prophet said,

"If you listen carefully you can even hear the thunder of war horses as they storm down the valley on the way to Jerusalem." (Jeremiah 8:16)

But, look at *how* the prophet preaches.
He is broken hearted over the destruction that is to come.

He refers to the people of Judah as "my poor people."

And his eyes are filled with tears for the pain that they will suffer.

To me the prophecy of Jeremiah provides a template for good preaching.

We tell the truth. We tell God's truth.
But, we do it with tears in our eyes.

Have you ever cried so much that you couldn't cry any more, even though you wanted to?
I have.

And that's how it is for Jeremiah.
He longs to cry.
But, his tear ducts have dried up.

He wished that his head was a spring of water and his eyes a fountain so that he could cry day and night for his poor people.

These are not the words of someone who is cold and aloof.

These are the words of someone who cares deeply.
Even as he preaches a word of judgment, the prophet's eyes are filled with tears.

In fact Jeremiah cried so much during his ministry that he is even referred to by many as "the weeping prophet".

Now where I come from weeping uncontrollably is not seen as a good thing especially for guys. We were taught to be strong and not show excessive emotion.

But, for Jeremiah, tears were an important part of his ministry.

And I believe that God weeps with the prophet at the failure of his people.

Jeremiah's tears not only give us insight into the heart of the prophet; they also give us insight into the heart of God.

God's heart is broken by the failures of his children.

The apostle Paul even suggested that weeping might even be an important part of being a Christian. He wrote in his letter to the Romans that we should "weep with those who weep." (Romans 12:15)

In other words, we do not try to minimize the pain of others or suggest that things aren't as bad as they seem. We don't take the unrealistic view that somehow great difficulties will disappear overnight.

We just take the time to mourn with those who mourn. Sometimes weeping can do more good than anything else.

HOSPITAL MINISTRY

This past Tuesday Hal, Steve and I had the opportunity to hear Rodger Nishioka at Presbytery. For many years Rodger was a professor at Columbia Seminary, and he told a story about a young student's first experience in a hospital.

When I attended Columbia Seminary, there was one course that many students dreaded.

It was our introduction to pastoral care.

It was one of those throw you into the deep end of the pool and see if you might swim sort of experience.

We'd drive to a downtown Atlanta hospital where many of the patients came from a much different background than us.

And then after a brief pep talk we'd go into the hospital room of somebody we didn't know and say something like,

"Hi, I'm your chaplain.
Can I be of help to you today?"

Now they told us to stand up straight and act like we owned the place. But, you know how first year students would respond to such a situation.

We were scared to death, and I'm sure it showed.

And, by the way, after this harrowing experience we met as a group, and everyone got the chance to describe what a mess we had made of things as we tried to do ministry.

Some folks actually gave up on the idea of being a minister as a result of this course.

Many things have changed at my old seminary, but apparently one thing remains the same.
They still torture students with this course.

Well, Rodger talked about a student who taking this course.

She was younger than most of the other students and small of stature. And she was entering a hospital room for the first time.

In that room there was a very handsome African American man holding the hand of his beautiful wife. The student said very softly,

"Hi. I'm your chaplain.
Can I be of help to you today?"

And the man replied loudly,

"Little girl, this is my wife of 40 years.
She's the love of my life.

The doctors tell me that she is losing her memory and before long she won't even know me any more. If you can explain to me how God is involved in all this you can stay.

But, if you can't just move on down the line."

Rodger asked, "What did you do?"

She said, "I wanted to move on down the line but my legs wouldn't move.

Instead, I began to cry. I tried to hide it by holding my head down, but then I began to sob.

And the sobs just got out of hand."

"So what happened next?"

The man said, "Pastor, please come sit beside me and hold my hand."

"So, what happened next?"

She said, "I finally got my legs to move ... and I sat next to that man for forty five minutes."

"What did you talk about?"

"We didn't talk. We just cried and sobbed together. I felt like such a failure."

But, Rodger reassured her. He said,
"Oh, you were made for this ministry.
This is what you have been called to do."

The Lord still needs weeping prophets.
The Lord still needs people who can be honest and compassionate at the same time.

The Lord still needs prophets who will go where they would rather not go and say what they would rather not say to people who are very reluctant to hear.

THERE IS A BALM IN GILEAD

Is there a balm in Gilead?

Indeed there is.

The balm of Gilead can be found in the tears of God's prophet
... and the tears of God's own son.

The Bible tells us that we do not have a high priest who is unfamiliar with the struggles of life. Jesus was tested in every way, just as we are. He understands. (Hebrews 4:15)

But, unlike us, Jesus was able to overcome the temptations and the struggles.

And on the cross the Lamb of God made the perfect sacrifice.

He said through tear filled eyes,
"Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

"Jesus wept."

That's the shortest verse in the Bible.
But, it may be the most profound.

The words of the weeping prophet, and the words of the weeping Savior can heal.

I know.
We sang the second hymn last week.

But, let's sing it again this week.
It bears repeating.
We need to hear it again.

There is a balm in Gilead.
It makes the wounded whole.
It heals the sin-sick soul.

Amen.