

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

My joy is gone, grief is upon me,
my heart is sick.
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?")
"The harvest is past, the summer is ended,
and we are not saved."
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?
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!

There *is* a Balm in Gilead!

“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly....” That’s what our Collect of the Day says this morning. There are so many earthly anxieties that we deal with: maintaining our finances, raising children, caring for aging parents, keeping up with our health care – there’s a lot we’re responsible for.

Yet the prayer continues: "...even now," it says, "while we are placed among things that are passing away, [let us] hold fast those [things] that shall endure."

"While we are placed among things that are passing away"? Could that be true? Is this collect just describing the reality of life in our world where things do not last forever, where change comes whether we like it or not, where we must find some kind of path forward without any real ability to control where exactly we are going? Perhaps we *have been placed* among things that are passing away. Perhaps it's all falling down around us and there is little we can do to make it stop.

This reminds me of how so many people talk about America or our world these days. You can pick just about any headline you'd like. You can even pick which side of the aisle says it. One thing is for certain, though, everyone agrees that our beloved country is going to hell in a handbag.

When our youngest daughter was born, a church member gave our older daughter a classic children's book from the Frances the Badger series. This book, carefully chosen no doubt, was entitled *A Baby Sister for Frances*. In it, the protagonist, a young badger named Frances of 5 or 6 years old, now has a baby sister who, much to Frances's frustration, is receiving a lot of attention from her parents. Frances tries singing her adorable songs, she tries putting a bunch of rocks in a coffee can and shaking it while she marches around the house, but nothing really seems to get her parents' attention like it used to. The next day, Frances the Badger wants to get ready for school but the dress she wants to wear isn't ready.

"I was so busy with your sister," her mother says, "that I didn't have time to iron it. You'll have to wear the other one today."

Then, when Frances sits down to have breakfast before school, her oatmeal does NOT have raisins in it like usual.

"Mother, did you forget that I like raisins in my oatmeal?" Frances asks.

"No, I did not forget," says Mother. "But you finished up the raisins yesterday and I have not been out shopping yet."

"Well," says Frances in a moment of kindergarten clarity, "Things are not very good around here anymore. No clothes to wear, no raisins for the oatmeal, I think maybe I will run away."

She then asks her mom what time dinner will be and decides there will be plenty of time to run away after dinner that night.

But don't you just love her summation of it all: "Things are not very good around here anymore"?

It's like what I hear people say all the time:

"These days, there's no telling what might happen."

Or, "With this generation, they get to do whatever they want whenever they want."

Or, "I'll tell you one thing, that's not how it used to be."

Or, "That's not how we did it *my* day."

I guess things are not very good around here anymore. It's as if we have been placed among things that are passing away.

But you know what's funny about these kinds of earthly anxieties? It's that I'm not even sure they are real. They are just anxieties about changes that could happen or that might be happening... who can say? I wonder: Could the stress that comes with the anticipation of change be worse than the change itself once it arrives? The fear of the unknown can drive us mad and be too much to bear. It can wreck us, cripple us, leave us unable to do anything. Before you know it, we are clinging to earthly things that seem more reliable. We can even find familiarity in our collective anxiety about change, real or imagined.

Then there are the rather different cries like we heard from our psalmist today and from the prophet Jeremiah. They are not in despair because of what might occur. These are not abstract earthly anxieties. These are the sobs which ring out in the night when destruction and death and loss come to stay. "My joy is gone," says Jeremiah, "grief is upon me, my heart is sick."

These are people who are experiencing the real losses of human existence. At some point –sooner or later – hurts and sicknesses and change will land on you whether you want it to or not. The fragility of our existence is undeniable. Love ones who filled our life with meaning and companionship are unable to do so forever, some struck down in the prime of their lives and others slowly but surely slipping away right in front of us, as we eventually lose our feud with time itself. "How long, O Lord? Will your fury blaze like fire for ever?" the Psalmist cries.

For the people of Israel in Jeremiah's day, a time of prosperity existed for several years under young King Josiah starting around the year 650 BC. A movement of unity brought divided people together. Religious reforms reestablished the law. Years turned into decades with times of

good living, plenty of food to eat, opportunities for all. But even then, they were placed among things that were passing away. *Even long-serving, faithful monarchs eventually die.* Whether the fatal arrow is loosed by a foreign army or by time itself, none of us can go on forever. In 586, the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar II, sacked Jerusalem. His armies devoured Jacob, profaned the holy temple, and left the city in a heap of rubble (Psalm 79:1, 7).

You know there is this brand of Christianity that tells people to move through the world pretending to “Be Blessed” all the time, as if we are supposed to show up at work or at school as if everything is just peachy. Come to church and pretend that everything is perfectly fine. But God is never calling us to be dishonest about our human experiences, to pretend our pains and hurts are trivial. Instead, we see in Scripture the weeping that comes with losing those we love, the heart-sickness which infects us when we’re face to face with the suffering of perfectly innocent people. We grit our teeth and cry out, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician who can make us well?” (Jer. 8:32).

And how are we, O God, to *not* be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly? How can we now, while we are placed among things and people who are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure?

Perhaps to answer these questions we must turn to those who have suffered – not willingly but certainly well – as people whose hope could not be tamed by the crack of the whip or the weight of their chains. In 1860, four million people of African descent lived as slaves in this country. In spite of their circumstances – in spite of living lives that were not their own and under the constant threat of violence – they remained a people of hope, a people of community, and a people of song.

And having lived the experience described by the prophet Jeremiah in our Scriptures this morning, these enslaved people were entitled and equipped to answer the question, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Howard Thurman, a spiritual mentor to Dr. King, describes the process in his 1975 book on Negro Spirituals like this:

The peculiar genius of the Negro slave is revealed here in much of its structural splendor. The setting is the Book of Jeremiah. The prophet has come to a “Dead Sea” place in his life. Not only is he discouraged over the external events in the life of Israel, but he is also spiritually depressed and tortured. As a wounded animal he cried out, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” It is not a question of fact that he is raising—it is not a question directed to any particular person for an answer. It is not addressed either to God or to Israel, but rather it is a question raised by Jeremiah’s entire life. He is searching his own soul. He is stripped of the literal substance of himself, and is turned back on

himself for an answer. Jeremiah is actually saying, “There must be a balm in Gilead; it cannot be that there is no balm in Gilead.”

The relentless winnowing of his own bitter experience has laid bare his soul to the end that he is brought face to face with the very ground and core of his own faith.

Thurman continues:

The slave caught the mood of this spiritual dilemma, and with it did an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah’s sentence (“Is there no balm in Gilead?”) into an exclamation point: “There *is* a balm in Gilead!”¹

...to make the wounded whole! There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul!” What Howard Thurman goes on to say is that enslaved people could sing because in them there existed “an optimism that uses the pessimism of life as raw material out of which it creates its own strength.”² In other words, the reality of the hardship the enslaved faced led them to a conclusion that inherent to life itself is a moral code which no person – slave or master – was above. And eventually, the arrogance and hypocrisy of the slavemaster would – no matter how binding it appeared at the moment – it would come back around, it would run out, it would exhaust itself. And freedom would absolutely come. Hard times must not last forever.

They knew that God had more in store for them than bondage and that truth applies to you in your life, too. They would sing out: Sometimes you’ll get discouraged and think your work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives your soul again. There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.

Could Christ be that physician to heal the wounds inside of us that no one else can see? Could the Eucharist be that medicine which makes the wounded whole, which heals the sin-sick soul?

The one who has suffered for you and with you – Christ Jesus is his name – he is the very one singing out inside of you today saying, “Do not lose hope. There is a balm in Gilead. I am here to heal you and to set you free.”

¹ Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Friends United Press, 1975), pg. 55-56.

² Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual*, 56.