

September 1, 2019
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Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 There Is a Balm in Gilead
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Common English Bible

No healing, only grief; my heart is broken. Listen to the weeping of my people all across the land: “Isn’t the Lord in Zion? Is her king no longer there?” Why then did they anger me with their images, with pointless foreign gods? “The harvest is past, the summer has ended, yet we aren’t saved.” Because my people are crushed, I am crushed; darkness and despair overwhelm me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then have my people not been restored to health? If only my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, I would weep day and night for the wounds of my people.

I was talking with a friend the other day about the power of music, and because I am a preacher, we meant church music. My friend said, “hymns are theology that seeps into our soul.” The words that we sing teach us about God and that understanding seeps into our soul. I love that image! In fact, many hymns are restatements of Bible verses. Today we are looking at the song, that fits this called, “There is a Balm in Gilead.” We are also going to have a healing service. If you have never heard of a healing service, don’t worry.

When I served as a pastor in the Methodist Church in England, the churches that I served had healing services once every three months. I was not used to healing services. It was not something that I had ever experienced in my church when I was growing up. I thought healing was only something that I would see on the television as televangelists would hit someone on the head and the person would fall back because they had been healed. It is important for us to know and to claim that our Bible strongly affirms healing, in fact the root of the word healing in New Testament Greek, *sozo*, is the same as that of salvation and wholeness. Spiritual healing is God’s work of offering us wholeness of body, mind, spirit and relationships.

At the very back of your Bible, the book of James calls us also to pray for and anoint the sick, that they may be healed. “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.” (James 5:14–15). All healing is of God. A healing service does not detract from the gifts God gives through medicine and psychotherapy. Worship today is no substitute for either medicine or the proper care of our health. My hope is that our worship today will add to our total resources for wholeness.

A healing service is not a service of curing, but provides an atmosphere in which healing can happen. When we pray for healing, we often mean that we want to get better. But the ultimate form of healing is to be reconciled with God in heaven. Healing means that we are reunited or reconciled with God and when that happens, physical healing may occur, mental and emotional balance may be restored, spiritual health is enhanced, and relationships are healed.

The Kingdom of God is not here yet. The nature of our world and our humanity means that suffering will happen. We will get cancer, we will have disease, we will have depression, we will get hurt by the church, and we will get hurt by other people, sometimes by our fellow church members. God does not promise that we shall be spared suffering but does promise to be with us in our suffering. In the worst of times for us, we will not be alone. Those are really powerful words.

In the Bible passage that we read from Jeremiah, the people feel alone. Israel was in exile and the Babylonians were preparing to violate their holy places for treasure, which would dishonor their dead.¹ Jerusalem will be devastated and the temple destroyed. The people feel hopeless and they wondered what they had done to deserve this. It was the most desperate and

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-there-is-a-balm-in-gilead>

hopeless time in Israel's history. God and Jeremiah have done everything possible to persuade the people of Judah to turn away from their sinful ways and turn toward God, but the people have ignored their pleas.

God and Jeremiah know the devastation that is about to come to Judah, and they are heartbroken for what is about to happen. The passage ends with these three rhetorical questions, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then have my people not been restored to health?" Gilead was a mountainous region on the east side of the Jordan River. It was known for a healing balm made from the resin of one of its trees, but the people are suffering so much, they have messed up so much that there is nothing in Gilead that can offer the people healing and salvation. The people of Judah are beyond the reach of help from physicians. They need healing that reaches to the core of their being. Only God can bring such healing.

The refrain that we sing in "There Is a Balm in Gilead" encourages us and dares us to respond with hope in the face of hopelessness, to show courage in the face of despair. This song was sung by people who were enslaved. African American theological Howard Thurman says that, "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 into an exclamation point."² From is there no balm in Gilead to there is a balm in Gilead.

As long as there is balm in Gilead, and as long as there are physicians who can restore health, we have the ability to receive God's healing and transformation. There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. I think of all the people throughout the ages who have sung this song. By singing together we are able to transform Jeremiah's question mark into an exclamation point. There is hope when I feel alone and there is hope when I feel discouraged.

We are people with good news that God is here and we are loved. It is enough. You are perfect, just as you are. You are the gospel. The good news is that God is here and you are loved. Hope remains, joy persists and we are invited to soak it in because life is both so beautiful and so hard.³

We bring to God our frailty and brokenness. We bring anything that weighs us down. We bring our concerns for others and for our world. We come to God who knows our needs before we ask, and whose love revealed in Jesus Christ is stronger than suffering and death. Healing occurs when the dead areas of our lives are replaced with living tissue.

Jesus is calling us forward. Our hurts, mistakes, sorrows, and regrets have marked us and they may describe us but they do not define us. We are God's beloved children. Jesus' resurrection assures us that God's love is more powerful than our tragedies and that the future is always open.⁴

After you receive the bread and the juice from Communion, I want to invite you to receive a blessing of healing to remind yourself that you are a beloved child of God. Kristin Mallory and I will be at the front to anoint you with oil making the sign of the cross on your forehead. Anointing the forehead with oil points to the healing love of God. Many people find prayer, and also Holy Communion, laying on of hands, and anointing with oil to be healing.

We are all hurting in different ways. Some of us have illness or injury, some of us have damaged or broken relationships, and some of us have traumatic memories, or guilt or estrangement from God. We come seeking salvation and wholeness. May we be reminded that we are marked as a blessed child of God, always. We are not alone.

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-there-is-a-balm-in-gilead>

³ Bowler, Kate. Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved.

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/03/lent-4-a-the-man-who-now-sees/>

