

# HURTING, HEALING, AND HOPING IN GILEAD

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Thursday, September 19, 2019

Scripture: [Jeremiah 8:18–9:1](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today, if you haven't caught a theme yet, our scripture is not a cheery one. Today, we're going to read from the prophet Jeremiah... the prophet who tried to weasel out of his mission (because all prophets try to weasel out of their missions) by saying to God, "I am but a youth." To which God essentially says... grow up.

So here's this kid, who God has called to stand up to all the leaders of his society, and the whole culture around him, and proclaim profoundly *bad news*. The people of Israel will face exile and destruction. Their lives will be uprooted.

And Jeremiah brings this news. But then, he bursts out in this song of Lament. He cries out for his people... wondering what good news there might be... it's a cry of anguish... and I think, maybe at a different scale, it's a cry we each know in our own way. Wondering... deeply... where God may be found in times of pain and loss.

## SERMON

Lament is a wholly under appreciated part of our biblical writings. In a nation that I think has created a stereotype of Christianity that is about feeling good, or #blessed, all the time, I find that we can be willfully ignorant of the deep, heart-sick cries of the psalmist and the prophets, the wandering and lost Israelites mid-exodus. We are please to rejoice in the good news of Easter Sunday, but tend to skip Jesus crying out to God in the garden of Gesthemene, or the pleas to God on the cross.

By skipping these parts of our history and tradition I think we convince ourselves that suffering or at least the acknowledgment of it is "not spiritual" somehow.

It is both one of the profound honors and places where I feel the deepest responsibility in my work to be trusted and invited to accompany people in times of crisis, trauma, and grief... and when lament is needed, to bear witness and hear it. It's a commitment of mine that when somebody uses a four-letter word to describe where they're at... well, I almost always tell them they've used the correct technical term!

Jeremiah calls out in his pain: "Is there no balm in Gilead?" in a way that I think cries out for justice and hope. He lives and proclaims a time and theology of corporate sin which we would probably not subscribe to... i.e. all of his nation of Judah will be destroyed in response to the people's turning away from God. I hear in his plea a concern for those who will impacted through no fault of their own. As is still so true, those who bear the brunt of systemic wrong-doings are often those who bear little or no responsibility for it.

...that I might weep day and night  
for the slain of my poor people!... Is there no balm in Gilead for this pain?

Gilead has a bad name these days mostly... if you've ever read "A Handmaid's Tale," or seen the TV show... Gilead is not a good place.

But Gilead was anything but to Jeremiah... it was off the beaten track, further east into what we now call Jordan... but it was a place of rolling hills and plant life... including one that was apparently renowned for being a source of a healing resin... For all sorts of reasons, its difficult to figure out exactly what plant our ancestors were talking about... even experts would balk at doing so by playing an almost 3000 year old game of telephone.

Folks have always been on the hunt for the genuine article, though, because then, and since, even just the phrase "Balm of Gilead" has come to mean a universal cure... a thing that would almost magically heal any ailment or injury.

That's what Jeremiah cries out for today... the miracle cure. The way to spare his people pain. The healing that will remove any trace of suffering.

We all want that right? Medical research and pharmacology are huge industries of our learning and development as a society in the literal sense, of course, and rightly so... But I often find that we rush just as much to short cut pain and injury of others sorts as well.

Well, it turns out, in every myth, there's always a little bit of truth... and so in the "I love my job" category, this week I found myself becoming an amateur botanist, and chemist, and well... definitely not a doctor... So we can't be sure, but what we call "Balm of Gilead" did exist, and does still in the areas around which trade brought spices, resin, and other products to Israel and Judea: *Commiphora Gileadensis* which it has lots of good things going for it... it has something called  $\beta$ -Caryophyllene in it which has anti-inflammatory, anaesthetic, and antifungal properties... it is even cytotoxic (it goes after tumors in interesting ways.) The ancestors are no dummies.

So, remember, I'm not a doctor... but before you hunting it down for essential oils or whatever... it doesn't really have those properties in any greater abundance than a lot of the niceties of life which we have gathered around ourselves in modern life... But in ancient life?

Well, it wasn't a miracle cure... but it did buy you time. It couldn't heal any wound, but it might have been able to give you the time you needed heal on your own. Our bodies and our whole selves are miraculous... it turns out that you even heal differently depending on a number of things: if your body is behaving as if you are under stress, or if your body senses possible source of infection... it will work to heal up even more quickly... but it does the kind of job I used to do when I was moving out of a college dorm room... this is about fast, not right. The scars left behind may be tough, inflexible, painful in their own right.

No, it turns out to heal *well* you need time.

All too often, I find that we can withdraw time with the pain—of our own, or of others' lives. We can either try to stop up grief, or we can simply fail to show up... I often hear that people are afraid to say the wrong thing... I used to say there's no such thing... but there are a few... but that's another sermon.

What if the miracle cure is actually to care and hold enough that those our wounds can heal... and heal wholly? The balm above all others then may be tender presence that doesn't try to force healing any faster than we can manage.

For us, we know that Jesus showed up at the bedsides of friends and disciples. He wept when others wept in grief and pain. He showed up. He showed up so significantly in human life, to be present with and know suffering and sadness... and to endure them with us...

In that showing up, God promises that being present to others in their lament is in itself transformation... In that showing up, even death and resurrection show us that we are not alone... no matter what pain of the present we may face.

If you are in a tender place this day, I hope that you know you are not alone. Both because we trust that God is with us and hears our cries, and because we have all been gifted with this community to care for us tenderly while we heal.

It gives us strength to go out and live boldly for the healing of others, knowing that we are not alone, even in times of grief, even and especially when our cries lift their way to God.

May you be given that balm of compassion, time, and healing... this day and every day.  
Amen.