

March 22, 2020

“There is a Balm in Gilead”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Jeremiah 8:15-16, 18-19,22

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

We were waiting around for healing — and terror showed up!

From the land of Dan at the northern borders we hear the hooves of horses.

Horses galloping, horses neighing. The ground shudders and quakes.

They're going to swallow up the whole country. Towns and people alike.

I drown in grief. I'm heartsick.

Oh, listen! Please listen! It's the cry of my dear people reverberating through the country.

Is GOD no longer in Jerusalem? Has the King gone away?

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

Why then is there no healing for the wounds of my people?

Jeremiah is asking one of the Bible's most famous rhetorical questions. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? The answer is, of course there was. The region of Gilead, which is now modern day Jordan, was known for the healing balm it produced. Yet here were the Israelites, going through some very difficult times. The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, was asserting his power in the region of Judah, and the Israelites were suffering under his heavy hand. But rather than having faith and trust in the Almighty God for their deliverance, they fell away into idolatry, worshiping other gods, participating in pagan rituals, following anyone who they thought could help them. Eventually, with the destruction of Jerusalem they are taken away as slaves into Babylonia, where they are humbled as a people. And here is Jeremiah, pleading for them and pleading with them. Pleading that they put their faith and trust and hope back in Almighty God so they might be healed.

And in a similar fashion, a pandemic is swallowing up our country. Towns and people alike. And last week I mentioned how we, as a nation, and now as a world, have been humbled. We are sick to our souls. People out of work, our movement and gatherings limited, store shelves empty, the economy reeling, people sick and dying, all of course, due to the worry and concern and fear over the coronavirus. My message last week, which bears repeating again, is, “Fear not!” Stay calm! Because there is a power in our lives much stronger than the pandemic that is asserting its power over us today. And that is our Almighty God. Remember again, we are in Lent, on our way to Easter, where God proved that

nothing, not even death, can defeat us. And so listen to God's words once more: "Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for I, the Lord your God am with you wherever you go."

Now speaking of Lent, isn't it ironic that we're being forced to sacrifice and give up some things. Perhaps what we are going through provides us the perfect time and opportunity to draw closer to God. Because of what we are sacrificing, this could be a time like none other we've ever experienced to reflect on our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ's great sacrifice for us. And an opportunity to look more closely at our own lives in light of his sacrifice. So beginning tomorrow, if you haven't already done so, may I suggest starting a spiritual discipline – making time to pray - since with all the things we're trying to contain the virus, I hear very little regarding prayer. Make time to read your Bible, time to really think about your relationship with God. Because some day, hopefully sooner rather than later, we will celebrate Easter together. It may or may not be on April 12th, but on whatever day we do come together, we will undoubtedly experience a joy about Easter greater than we have ever felt before. We will know what the women and the disciples must have felt when they knew - Christ is alive! Christ is alive indeed! "Halleluiah!"

Now getting back to my message. I'm sure the question on everyone's mind is, "When and how is this is all going to end?" After all, we are a very impatient people. Americans aren't used to living like this. And apparently there is no end in sight as of now. But here is where we must be careful. Because, aside from worshiping other gods like the Israelites did, another form of idolatry that is deeply rooted in Scripture, is idolatry that is a distrust, or insufficient trust in God. Let me repeat that. Another form of idolatry is a distrust, or insufficient trust in God. When we look to someone or something else instead of, or in addition to God, to make us feel hopeful and unafraid. Now I'm certain none of us deny the existence of God, but many of us may question his sufficiency and sovereignty. I'm sure we all look to God for comfort and support, but how many of us truly consider him as Almighty? Think about that. Is God Almighty? Because what happens to your faith when everything you have and believe in and live by is smashed to bits by life's circumstances? Like the pandemic we are going through now. Has your faith been tested? Things like this are hard enough for us to handle as individuals, but it's even more frightening when they affect entire communities and the very fabric of our society. Yet, in these circumstances, as Christians, it is imperative for us to put our faith and trust in God to see us through. Yes, it can be difficult. But faith by its very nature must be tried. And much of what we call a trial of faith is the inevitable result of just being alive. Mortals here on planet Earth. You see faith in the Bible

is faith in God over and against everything that contradicts him. That's why there is something amazingly humbling and beautiful in trusting God in these times of trouble and hardship. Oswald Chambers says it best. "Someday I will stand face to face with Jesus Christ, and he will say to me, 'Do you believe?' And at that moment I will find that my faith is as natural as breathing, and I will be staggered that I was so stupid as to ever not trust him in the first place."

To ever not trust him in the first place. That's exactly why I chose today's Scripture. Because the rhetorical question Jeremiah asked was made famous as an African-American spiritual. By slaves who suffered troubles and hardships that we cannot imagine, also with no end in sight. Troubles and hardships that make what we're going through just a walk down easy street. Yet this song was an expression of faith and trust and hope, emphasizing the healing that God, through Jesus Christ, will provide us. Just listen to some of the words. *Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain, But then the Holy Spirit revives my 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.* This hymn interprets Jeremiah's words by declaring that our Jesus Christ is the Balm of Gilead. And the very Spirit that led and fed the life of Jesus Christ, will lead and feed our lives through this crisis as well.

So when troubles happen, or a pandemic hits, let us use these adversities to re-form our lives so that we might conform more into the kind of people Christ wants us to be. Because the balm we have in our possession is precious, and the remedy everlasting: his sweet words and promises, his sovereign grace, and his everlasting love for you and me. Amen.

.