

Is There No Balm in Gilead?

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,
Preached on the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, (19Sept), 2010.

Text: Jeremiah 8:18

“My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.
Hear, 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?’”

It was nine years ago on this Sunday, the last time I preached on Jeremiah’s plaintive cry, “*Is there no balm in Gilead?*”¹ A terrible thing had happened on the Tuesday morning before and many of us read this text with tears in our eyes. One of you had called out in a prayer meeting that week after the attack in New York that he had lost forty or fifty colleagues. We did not know it at the time because the numbers were still being tallied and there was still hope to find the living among the dead, but twelve homes in Glen Ridge had lost family members and many had lost friends and colleagues. I remind you of Jeremiah’s lament then and how it so delicately fit the hopeless, grief-struck way we felt in those days:

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?”²

Is there no balm in Gilead? That is the Bible’s poetry asking, Where is God? Can God not help us in our distress? *Is there no balm in Gilead?* The short answer, in retrospect, is: *Yes, there is.* “There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.” But in those days nine years ago, it did not feel like that and for many, prayers seemed unanswered. Was God not listening? How had such a horrible thing happened in the first place? Where was God?

Jeremiah lived in a similar time. Disaster was upon Judah; invasion, imminent. He warned but no one listened. The Negro Spiritual of the same name was sung by an enslaved people, who also felt the discouragement of prayers not answered. They read these oracles of Jeremiah, uttered in a far different time and place, thousands of years before their own time,³ and found in these words someone who understood exactly what they felt, who knew their despair, and yet who still believed in God. There are times when we do not know what else to do but call out to God. Though the words lament God’s absence, still we call out to God. I spoke last week

¹ Jeremiah 8:22.

² Jeremiah 8:18-19.

³ Jeremiah is thought to have lived between 627-580 BC.

personally about such a time in my life. I called out for help. God answered but for a while it seemed only silence greeted my prayers.

There is a smile-if-you-love-Jesus, always happy kind of Christianity. Truth be told, we prefer that sort of sensibility, but life does not always give us cause for giddiness. Moreover, there is something about discouragement that turns us to God. Good times do not usually deepen our spiritual lives. Something must happen to us; only then do we seek God. At the center of our Christian faith is a God who listens. I spoke last week about *yes* answers to prayers carrying as many consequences as *no* answers. Back in Maine, years ago I attended an Ecclesiastical Council of the Lincoln Association. We were in the meetinghouse of the Edgecomb Congregational Church. We were there to examine a young man's fitness for ordination. He read to the ministers and delegates a paper about his faith and calling. In one section he spoke quite movingly about an answer to prayer earlier in his life, an event which led to his call into the ministry. He or someone close to him was seriously ill and a healing occurred. After his paper the ministers and delegates got the chance to examine the candidate and ask questions. He was fairly young, just out of Bangor Seminary. Though he had this experience with illness and healing, his faith was more acquainted with *yesses* than *nos*. One of my colleagues went after him without mercy about the healing and the answer to prayer. The young man stood his ground, and not a few of us felt sorry for the grilling he received from this older minister. Afterwards we voted to ordain him, and we all went into the vestry for refreshments. I happened to be at the tea table across from the older minister who had challenged the young candidate. I said, "Wes, why did you go after him with such fervor?" He replied, "David, I had a grandson with cancer. We prayed for him and he died anyway. I do not believe in a God who answers such prayers." Well, what can you say? A *Yes* has consequences that change us. But a *No* has consequences, too. How do you believe in God if the answer you get is *No*?

In the years since I have often wondered about that older colleague. There was a bitterness about his questions to that young man. Perhaps the young man was naïve. Still, is the only alternative anger, disillusionment, despair? There is nothing wrong with asking the question, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Certainly there are times when we feel only the absence of God. Implicitly, however—even if we don't acknowledge it—the question is directed at God. And the answers we receive from our Maker? Sometimes a *no*, sometimes a *yes*. Both are answers to prayer. Both answers carry consequences. The great thing about the old spiritual *There Is a Balm in Gilead* is the way the lyric (and the tune) express both the feelings of the song writer/singer and yet also hope for redemption. Yes, 'sometimes I feel discouraged,' but 'there is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.'

The world and life always try to turn us away from trust in God. That is just the way the world is. I told you last week about my neighbor up in New Hampshire, the family-practice doctor who came to sit with me on my porch the week after my surgery, during the time I did not

yet know what the pathology report said. After we talked about the medical strategies for my illness, I asked him to pray for me. He pulled up his chair and held my hand and began to pray. In his prayer he spoke about healing but also the consequences of a healing. “Lord,” he said, “we believe you have plans yet for David to do for you.” A week later I had received the very good news about my illness and the pathology report, and this time I went to see him on his porch. I talked to him about his prayer, medicine and healing. He is an M.D.: he believes in medical science. He is also a Christian and believes in prayer. “David,” he told me, “it never hurts to ask God for healing. I have patients that I do everything medically for and still it is not enough. I have patients whom I fear will die but don’t. Is it medicine or grace? I don’t know. I know it is not either/or. I also know it never hurts to ask for God’s help.”

“Is there no balm in Gilead?” The paradox implied in this question cannot be glibly answered. I have felt this way myself at times, a feeling that there is no balm. But in time and with good friends who pray for us, who stand by us, and help us bear our burdens, we find grace. Yes, there is a balm in Gilead, *to make the wounded whole*. That is what we believe. And of all people, we Christians ought to be the ones who reach out to our loved ones and neighbors with the offer of prayers, grace, healing, and faith.

End

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