A Balm in Gilead

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; John 3:13-17
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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The title of my sermon this morning comes from the prophet Jeremiah's rhetorical question in verse 22: "Is there no balm in Gilead?"

A balm in Gilead.

This may be a familiar expression to some of us, one of those idioms or things that we say without really being aware of its origins.

In Western culture, many times the origins of these expressions come from the bible.

A few examples:

"A fly in the ointment." This is a saying we might use to refer to something unexpected that causes trouble or ruins the larger whole.

Well, it comes from the book of Ecclesiastes: "Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a foul odour; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour."

"A leopard cannot change its spots." We might use this one if we want to say that someone cannot change their essential nature.

This is a rewording of Jeremiah 13:23 where the prophet asks "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?"

Ironically, this comes from a passage where Jeremiah is so frustrated with the people of Israel, that he seems to say that they almost can't even stop sinning!

How about “The writing is on the wall?”

This has been a proverbial omen of misfortune. It comes from the book of Daniel, where a grand banquet is hosted by the Babylonian king. Midway through the feast, a ghostly disembodied hand appears behind the king and writes on the wall in Hebrew. The king doesn’t know what it means, so he summons Daniel, who delivers the unpleasant news that the king’s kingdom is soon to be “numbered, weighed, and divided.” That night, the king is killed, and Babylon is claimed by the Persians.

I even used one last night. In referring to someone who had shown up somewhere just in time, I said they had arrived “at the eleventh hour.”

This is a reference to Jesus’ parable about the workers in the vineyard, where those who arrived with only one hour left in the workday inexplicably got paid as much as those who had been there all day.

“A balm in Gilead” is perhaps not quite as common an expression as some of these, but I think many of us would recognize it as a poetic reference to something that brings solace or provides healing or cure or restoration of some kind.

Gilead is a place in modern Jordan, and in Jeremiah’s time was known for the tree that made a soothing ointment (balm).

In popular culture, *Gilead* is the title of a marvelous novel by the great American writer Marilynne Robinson (the novel is set in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa).

“A Balm in Gilead” is also the name of an African American spiritual likely written in the 1800’s, where the “balm” is interpreted as spiritual medicine that is able to heal the “sin sick soul.”

At a first glance, it’s somewhat strange that this expression and the place it refers to have lodged themselves in our cultural imagination in largely positive ways.

Because in context, the implied answer to Jeremiah's rhetorical question—"Is there no balm in Gilead?"—is, "no." There isn't. There is no healing, no cure, no solace to be found.

This is a passage of mourning. There is no hope on the immediate horizon.

Jeremiah is often called "the weeping prophet." With the exception of a few chapters, the book of Jeremiah is fairly gloomy and depressing.

There is almost nothing that Jeremiah does not denounce. He denounces Israel's king and religious leaders. He denounces the rich for exploiting the poor. He denounces *all* the people for the way they chase after every new idol that shows up on the scene.

Much of the book of Jeremiah is a long and tedious list of scoldings and warnings repeatedly ignored by Israel.

But here, in our text this morning, Jeremiah just seems… sad.

His joy is gone. His heart is sick. He feels like weeping day and night.

His people are in moral and spiritual crisis. And he feels helpless to do anything to change their course.

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We, too, often feel helpless when the world seems like it is circling the drain in a moral and spiritual crisis, or when our own lives are not going as we had hoped.

In my experience, there are two common responses to this from people of faith, which I'll illustrate with two short stories (these aren't the only two, just two that I have observed with some frequency).

The first story takes place in a shuttle van. I was getting a ride somewhere and I made the mistake of answering the driver's "what do you do for a living" question honestly.

(As soon as people find out you're a pastor, pretty much anything is possible. It could be a prelude to anything from a blow by blow itemization of someone's grievances with the church or confession time or awkward silence or any number of other responses.)

Well, this guy launched right into it. "I think God is about to purify the world with wind and fire," he said.

The world was going very badly, in his view. Sexual immorality, secularism, the breakdown of families, natural disasters, wars and rumours of war, etc.

And so, God was about to exact vengeance. The world was going to be destroyed and only the righteous few (him, certainly, maybe me, it was too soon to be sure) would be saved.

Now, I didn't happen to agree with most of this guy's theology or his interpretation of Scripture.

But the more I listened to his story, the more sympathetic I became. He had lost his wife to cancer in his forties. He had been left with four teenagers on his own. He had lost two other family members almost immediately after. He had been near the point of a mental breakdown.

He told me he felt like he was being "spiritually terrorized, like Job." No doubt. I could only shake my head at what he had endured. No wonder he felt like the world ought to get around to ending. His had certainly seemed to be.

So, that's one response to a moral and spiritual crisis. Judgment is coming!

(This is a common response in Jeremiah and throughout Scripture, too, it has to be said!)

The second way many deal with the sadness and the crises around us is illustrated by a trip to the hospital a while back.

I arrived to visit someone and was greeted by a nurse at the front entrance (Covid protocols).

“Oh, are you the son?” Her smile was so bright it almost radiated through her mask “No, the pastor,” I responded, with the same amount of trepidation that I had with the shuttle driver.

But she was not put off. She seemed to brighten even further. “Oh, the pastor,” she beamed. “How lovely.”

All of a sudden, she was eager not only to let me through the screening desk as quickly as possible but to personally escort me to the person’s room. She had some things she wanted to say.

“You know, I’m also a Christian,” she said as we make our way down the hall. “I know the person you’re visiting. Such a hard, sad story. Doesn’t seem to believe in miracles, though. I certainly do. I always tell people, ‘Get ready, because miracles are coming.’ I know they are. Do you believe in miracles, pastor?”

I smiled and said, “Yes, I believe in miracles. I might wish for a few more now and then, but I believe in them.”

“Well, that’s great she responded. “Don’t you worry, like I said, miracles are coming. I can feel it.”

I have encountered many people over the years who believe that miracles are always about to be unleashed on the world, that all God is waiting for is for us to get things right on our end.

I get why people are drawn to this. Wouldn’t it be great if the right prayers spoken in the right ways at the right time with the right levels of piety and intensity reliably led to healings?

But in the end, of course, we all die. Even miraculous healings just push the inevitable off a bit longer. And hospitals remain full of suffering people.

But this is another response to a perceived crisis. More and better faith, more and more faithful prayer are what's required. This will stop the bad things from happening to us and in our world.

To both of these people—the shuttle driver hoping for a fiery judgment and the nurse waiting for miracles amidst the suffering of the hospital ward—I wanted to say, in hindsight, "you know, sometimes it's ok to just be sad."

Hard things are not necessarily a referendum on your eschatology or a chance to prove that you believe in the supernatural in the right way.

Terrible things happen in the world. Watching people suffer in hospital beds is hard.

It's ok to leave the judgment and the interventions to God, to not need to manage or predict the ways in which God will deal with the world.

It's ok to not really know what's going on sometimes and to not feel the need to pretend otherwise for the sake of your faith.

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I wonder if there is anyone here who needs permission to just be sad in church today?

I've repeated in several contexts over the last few weeks that this past year, and these past few weeks since I got back from holidays have felt like a season of dying in the life of our church.

In the last three weeks I have had three gravesides or memorials (Frank Wolfe, Walter Franz, Dennis Neufeldt). In the last year or so we have also lost Vern Neufeld, Mary Janzen, Nettie Schulz, and Henry Dick.

We have mourned the tragic death of Johannes Roesch, one of our former VSers. I have done several graveside services and funerals for people not

directly connected to our church. It has been a year where death has seemed inescapable.

Even though I have been glad to proclaim the Christian hope of life beyond death in each of these contexts, there is a natural human sadness that comes along with this.

But it's not just death that makes us sad. The sources of our sadness are as many and varied as we are.

Maybe we're struggling at work. Maybe our marriage is in trouble. Maybe there is a fractured relationship that we don't know how to mend.

Maybe it is the challenges that come with aging. Maybe it's the state of the church. Maybe someone close to us is in trouble and we feel powerless to help. Maybe the news of the day has us struggling to find a hopeful future.

Are we allowed to bring our sadness to church?

I have a friend who told me that when they were growing up, if there was ever an argument between siblings or children and parents or between parents, her dad would say, "if we can't get this sorted out and put some smiles on our face before we get to church, I'm turning this car around and we're going home."

There's a common assumption at work here. You don't bring sadness to church. You don't bring messiness or anger or frustration or doubt or any of the ugly things you might be feeling to church.

Church is a place for sunshine and smiles not for doom and gloom like Jeremiah.

And yet, there Jeremiah sits, stubbornly in our bibles. He's obviously speaking to a specific people at a specific time and place who are suffering for a specific reason.

But I think it's important that we hear passages like this week's reading if for no other reason than they incorporate a fuller range of human experience into the life of faith and into the worship of the church.

They give us permission to be sad, even if for a moment. Or more than a moment.

Life can be hard. Losing those we love is hard.

We are all caught up in this mixed up world where bad things happen to us, where bad things sometimes happen *because* of us, where it's not always easy to tell the difference.

It"s ok to say that sometimes it *feels* like "the harvest is passed, the summer has ended, and we are not saved" (Jer. 8:20).

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Thank God that our feelings are not the whole story.

Wednesday was a day in the lectionary calendar that I'm guessing is unfamiliar to many of us, including me. Holy Cross.

I did a bit of reading on Holy Cross day. Apparently, it is a day (Sep 14) set aside by many churches across the Christian world to honour and remember the cross on a different day than Good Friday.

Well, even before I knew that Wednesday was "Holy Cross" day, I found myself thinking about the cross a lot last week, not least because of this banner that has been hanging here since last Sunday.

As you likely know, this is the banner that Dennis made for his baptism. On one level, the cross is an ugly symbol of a tool for execution. But of course on a deeper level, we believe that the cross is the cure for what ails us, and the source of our salvation.

One of the readings for Wednesday, September 14 was our first reading this morning, John 3:13-17, where we encounter these familiar words:

> For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

I decided to include this reading with the lament from Jeremiah for this Sunday because I couldn't leave you with Jeremiah's tears alone.

Tears are important, as I hope I've made clear by now. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus, wept over the city of Jerusalem that refused the things that made for peace, wept in the garden of Gethsemane as he shuddered under the weight of what he knew he must do.

Jesus, like, Jeremiah, knows what it feels like to be heartsick for his people.

But God is love. And love is stronger than our tears.

And God so loved the world, that God came in Jesus Christ. And God so loved that God did not come to condemn but to save.

Our task is simply to believe. To believe that God on a cross (and in an empty tomb) is the source of our healing.

Ultimately, as Christians, we believe that there *is* a balm in Gilead. Jesus. Jesus the Great Physician, Jesus the Man of Sorrows, Jesus the Prince of Peace and the Shepherd of our souls.

I was texting Naomi earlier in the week about how I might summarize the theme of my sermon today.

I replied: "It's ok to be sad, even in church; Jesus is still Lord." If you remember nothing else from my sermon, I hope you'll remember this.

So, let's sing the African American spiritual I referred to earlier. There is indeed a balm in Gilead.

Amen.

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