“Balm in Gilead”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

“Oh, woe is me,” says Jeremiah. Of all the prophets ever given a voice to speak, Jeremiah is a whiner. Don’t get me wrong, though. If ever a prophet had *cause* to whine, it was Jeremiah. Although what we read in the lesson for this morning is thought to be his own words, in all its poetic frustration and beauty, we can’t be sure about some of the later chapters of the book titled with his name. Jeremiah was a prophet given a voice in a time of great upheaval and great dismay. And he didn’t really want to say yes to the challenge of prophesying for God. Earlier in his career his “woe is me” could well have been called a “why me, Lord” response. By the way, he was twelve when he was called to prophesy. Respond he does, though, and then it is the priests and scribes that would keep him quiet. He is forbidden to carry his message into the temple gates and he would have been silenced without the help of his own scribe, Baruch, who is given credit for some of the later writings.

In chapter 8, we hear Jeremiah bemoaning the fate of God’s people, and wondering where God is in the face of their righteous leader’s having been brought down, and exile to Babylon keeping them from the joy of freedom in their own land. “My joy is gone, Lord.” Been there—done that. I imagine there are not many among us who have not at some time felt in the depths of despair. We don’t need Jeremiah to remind us that there are times that we feel so distant from the love and protection of the Almighty that we are sure our hearts are sick. We don’t need Jeremiah to remind us that there are times that we feel so forgotten, or that we look around us and find ourselves so sick with dismay.

We do need Jeremiah, though, because Jeremiah wasn’t only a whiner. Jeremiah was a prophet, called by God not only to let us read about his sadness millennia later. Jeremiah was called to speak to God’s people, and to call them to a new and different way of being. Jeremiah was called out to speak to God’s people and remind them of where they had gone wrong, and how they might go right. Jeremiah had been very specific in telling people just how far from God they had gotten, and that they had better get their lives in order and begin to live in accordance with God’s Holy Law, or they were going to get it. God was unhappy with them, and God would reveal this unhappiness as punishment. Armies from the north would destroy the comfort that God’s people believed was theirs for the having. Of course Jeremiah was told to shut his mouth; nobody wanted to hear what he had to say when it was a Word of condemnation for what they were doing.

But Jeremiah is a prophet, and as such he doesn’t only speak God’s word to the people. Anybody can look around and tell us that we will get what we deserve. Only a prophet carries God’s word to the people, and then turns around and carries a word to God. A prophet turns to God and *asks not that we get what we deserve*, but that we get *God’s mercy*. Jeremiah cries out in the passage we read for today, because he is surprised at the miserable state they are in. He is surprised that despite hoping for the wonderful turnaround the new king might have promised, this “second David,” Josiah, is killed. So, he turns from talking to the people to talking to God, and he wails and gnashes his teeth.

Jeremiah also asks a question, and the way he poses it tells us that he anticipates the answer. “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” He expects that there is balm, and he expects that there is a physician. He *has* believed that God will provide a soothing for their pain, and a remedy for their illness. He also *has believed* that the people were themselves a part of the illness. They have turned from God in disobeying God’s commands, and he has warned them that there would be some fallout because of their disobedience. Now, though, he turns back to God, and knows that God can provide healing. Can you feel the sorrow that Jeremiah was feeling when he was sure that he and his people were distant from God? Can you also feel with Jeremiah the joy of reassurance when God speaks to him as we read in the fourteenth chapter, and says, “If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the Lord.”

I explain to you from time to time that there is a regular schedule of readings for each day of the Christian year called the Revised Common Lectionary, and there are sometimes alternate readings. The passage we have heard from the prophet Amos is such an alternate reading, which I thought would be good for us to hear as a complement of sorts to the words of Jeremiah. I don’t mean that these lines from Amos offer a complement in the form of certain comfort, but in additionally highlighting our frequent human failings. Amos speaks to the faithful, those who mark their sabbath by following God’s rules about not cheating others but doing so only when forbidden by law. “Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land.” I wonder if you are like me and allow your thoughts to think about who *else* may be doing something like that. Amos and other prophets really ask that we look at *ourselves* to know which of our behaviors can be brought back in line so that we do nothing to trample on the needy. Indeed, we are called to *do* what is necessary to raise up the needy; to eliminate poverty. This wasn’t only a message for the people of Amos’ or Jeremiah’s time, though. Suffering hasn’t ended, and we seek just as hopefully for soothing; for healing.

We don’t live several centuries before the birth of Christ (just in case you were wondering). We live in what we now call the “Common Era,” and we know that this new era is anything but common. The prophets Jeremiah and Amos were called by God to speak to God’s people, but Jesus was sent by God—was God—to *lead* God’s people. While there are plenty of reasons in our day-to-day life that we may despair, the rhetoric of Jeremiah’s question carries far less weight. *Of course there is balm in Gilead* and in Blue Hill, and *of course* there is a physician here. We may be wind-burned, chapped and cracked—by illness, by loss, by disappointment, addiction, poverty or powerlessness. But God offers us relief through Jesus Christ.

I know that there are a lot of people who hear words like this and cringe at the notion that someone who lived over two thousand years ago has something to say to us now. We may be like the people to whom Jeremiah spoke, and disbelieve that God could possibly be revealed in a time and a country where there is bloodshed and all the woes that we *could* list. Nonetheless, God *is* present here, despite our doubts, and perhaps sometimes because of our fears. I can’t help but think of Paul’s words to Timothy here, and in part not because of what he says but the fact that it is Paul who is saying them. Paul’s own life is a reflection of the kind of turning around that Jeremiah had called to his people to do, and as Jesus’ faithful apostle, Paul is another prophet of sorts.

Paul, though, isn’t a mediator. When I read Paul’s letters I think of him more as a teacher and an example, as he himself says he was appointed: “a herald and an apostle.” In some of Paul’s letters, he is far more forceful, and we might say prophetic. In the verses we read for today, though, Paul simply asks that we pray. He asks that we plead, and he asks that we give thanks. You see, Paul assumes that we can talk to God, and that God hears us. Paul’s suggestion that we turn to God implies what he also states very directly: God desires that we be saved. God desires that we be soothed, and there is only one physician, “only one mediator between God and humankind, Jesus Christ, himself human.” What strikes me about this passage is not so much that we are told that Jesus is our mediator with God, but that the way in which we will be soothed is through our own prayers. They are not, immediately, prayers for ourselves. We ought to listen very closely to the wording in this passage. All our conversing with God in the form of prayer, supplication and thanks for kings and other leaders is ***so that*** we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. Yes, there is balm in Gilead and there is a physician, Jesus Christ. Yes, our sins are forgiven because Jesus died for us, but that isn’t the end of the story.

I really do keep lip balm around me at all times. I spend a great deal of time outdoors, and I spend time fighting off sunburn and windburn, and I also spend time soothing its effects, nonetheless. Also, without my doing anything to provoke it, I get colds that make cold sores, and I have fevers that make fever blisters. I know what to do for all these problems. I don’t want to make light of the more significant ailments that beset us, but I do want to suggest that we have as ready a remedy for them. We can pray. God ***is*** with us, through Jesus Christ whom God sent to us and who remains with us in the Holy Spirit. We need no other mediator to talk with God, and to know God’s response to us. God loves us, God forgives us, and God shows us a better way of living, through Jesus Christ who taught us to love. May we live into this promise well. Amen