

IS THERE NO BALM IN GILEAD?

Jeremiah 8:18--9:1

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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[before Scripture is read]:

There had been a severe drought in the land of Judah. The crops had been hurt by the hot, dry weather; so the harvest was disappointing. The summer had ended, the harvest was over, and there was still no rain. Jeremiah looked out at the parched fields, and mourned for the people who would have no bread because of the drought. He said:

[read Jeremiah 8:18-9:1]

Jeremiah saw the suffering of the people, he grieved for them, and he sympathized with them.

You and I also see the suffering in our world, and we grieve for and sympathize with those who suffer. For example:

- We grieve for and sympathize with those 3,800 American families who have lost loved ones in the war in Iraq, and with those perhaps hundreds of thousands Iraqi families who have lost loved ones in the war.
- We grieve for and sympathize with the women in Darfur who have been raped and whose husbands and fathers have been killed, and with the children in many African countries who have been forced into slavery.
- We grieve for and sympathize with the victims of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina.
- We grieve for and sympathize with those in our church who are struggling with cancer and other life-threatening diseases, and with those who have lost loved ones.

We grieve for and sympathize with those who suffer. But if that is all we do, is that enough?

Jeremiah grieved for and sympathized with the suffering of the people, but he did more than that. He also empathized with them. He identified with them. He tried to put himself in their shoes and walk with them on their journey of suffering. The people were asking the theological question, "Where is God in all of this?" "Is the Lord not in Zion?" the people asked.

Jeremiah took up their question and made it his own. "Is there no balm in Gilead?" he asked. "Is there no physician there?" Gilead was a region in Judah renowned for the healing plants and herbs that grew there. So Jeremiah was comparing the healing powers of the balms and herbs of Gilead with the healing power of God. But more than that, Jeremiah was raising the question: Where is God in the suffering of the people? Where is the balm of Gilead that is supposed to bring healing? "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Is there no God who cares?

When I was in China in 1995 as a member of the Presbyterian delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women, that question was asked by one of the women in our group. It was her first experience in a Third World country. As she saw the poverty and

the suffering of the people, especially the children, her faith in God was shaken. At dinner one night she asked those of us at her table: "Where is God in all of this? Is there no God who cares?" And as she asked the question, she wept.

The rest of us shared with her our own experiences of previous trips to Third World countries, when we had seen real poverty for the first time. We told her that we don't know why God allows such suffering to continue, but we do know that God is with those who suffer, that God suffers with them, and that God weeps with them and with those who weep for them.

Just as the woman sitting across the table from me was weeping out of empathy for the poor, so God weeps for all those who suffer, and God weeps with them. What Jeremiah said about himself can also be said about God: "O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people." Like Jeremiah, God identifies with the poor and the suffering and empathizes with them. God walks their journey with them, in their shoes.

One of my favorite preachers is Tom Troeger, Presbyterian minister, seminary professor of preaching, and hymn-writer. When he was preaching at Chautauqua some years ago, he asked the choir to sing, as part of his sermon, a hymn that he had written. And he told the story of how the hymn came to be written. A friend of his, Sally Ann Morris, who writes the music for hymns, had just lost a close friend to the disease AIDS. In her grieving she wrote a tune of lament. She called Tom Troeger on the phone long-distance and told him that she had written a lament but she had no words for it. Could he write the words? And she hummed the tune to him over the phone. [Have Marlene play the tune on the organ.] Tom Troeger began immediately to write words of lament to go with her tune, and this hymn is the result. The words are printed in your bulletin: "God weeps with us who weep and mourn." Please listen and reflect on the words as they are sung by the choir.

[Have hymn sung]

*God weeps with us who weep and mourn,
God's tears flow down with ours,
and God's own heart is bruised and worn from all the heavy hours
of watching while the soul's bright fire
burned lower day by day,
and pulse and breath and love's desire
dimmed down to ash and clay.*

*Through tears and sorrow, God, we share
a sense of your vast grief;
the weight of bearing every prayer for healing and relief,
the burden of our questions why,
the doubts that they engage,
and as our friends and loved ones die,
our hopelessness and rage.*

*And yet, because, like us, you weep,
we trust you will receive
and in your tender heart will keep the ones for whom we grieve,
while with your tears our hearts will taste
the deep, dear core of things
from which both life and death are graced
by love's renewing springs.*

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God is there in the midst of the suffering. God does care. In fact, God cares so much that God sent Jesus to live on earth as a person who was poor and who endured much suffering, so that Jesus could walk the walk with the poor and the suffering and share their pain.

Is there a balm in Gilead? Is there a physician there? The New Testament answers those questions with a resounding "Yes!" Yes, there is a balm in Gilead! Yes, there is a physician there! His name is Jesus, and he comes to show us God's compassion and empathy with the poor and the suffering.

Jesus calls us to follow him in empathizing with the poor and the suffering, in walking the walk with them, and in sharing our resources with them. Jesus calls us to be his hands and his feet in continuing his ministry of compassion and empathy. He calls us to be the physician who brings healing to the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the sick, and the grieving. Jesus calls us to be the balm of Gilead for the suffering people in our world.

In many things that you do as a congregation, you are the balm of Gilead. You are Jesus' hands and feet in extending his ministry of compassion and empathy. For example,

- When you cook and serve for Friends of Night People, you are being the balm of Gilead for the hungry people you feed.
- When you take food to a person who is recovering from surgery or who has just lost a loved one, you are being the balm of Gilead for that person who is hurting.
- When you bake and serve cookies for the residents of the Presbyterian Village, you are being the balm of Gilead for those who are lonely.
- When you work on a Habitat house, you are being the balm of Gilead for the family who will live there.
- When you go on a mission trip to Detroit or New Orleans, you are being the balm of Gilead for those people who are living in poverty.
- When you give money to support a school in Malawi or to send blankets to refugees, and when you assemble kits to send to Iraqi families, you are being the balm of Gilead for those in need.

Is there a balm in Gilead? Yes, there is a balm in Gilead! And its name is "Follower of Jesus." May that name describe all of us. Amen.