

092522 – Sermon – Is There No Balm in Gilead?

“I drown in grief.

I’m heartsick.

Oh, listen! Please listen!”

Jeremiah... not the most uplifting book in the Old Testament! A classmate of mine refers to him as “the crybaby prophet”. It’s a fitting description, I suppose. Poor Jeremiah lived in a time when the world was in turmoil - greed, self-interest, and immoral behaviour ruled the day. The rich grew richer on the backs of the poor - who suffered more and more. Political leaders waged war against each other to take over land and exert power... sound familiar?

From as early as his teenage years, Jeremiah was a prophet - warning the people of what would happen if their behaviour continued. He lamented their broken relationship with each other and with God. But it all fell on deaf ears. He even tried to reason with the king - things needed to change quickly or there would be dire consequences! The Babylonians were on their way and it was obvious to Jeremiah that they would defeat the people of Judah and capture the king. There was no hope that Jerusalem could be saved from Babylon and Jeremiah advised the king to surrender.

His warnings landed him in prison for treason.

And while he languished in the royal dungeon, everything he had predicted was coming to pass. His people had gone past the point of no return. Their fate was sealed. Jeremiah was understandably heart-broken. He had every reason to lament.

The people were terrified. This was the end of the history of the people of Judah! How could this be? They were in the place where God was supposed to be – in Jerusalem, right there on Mount Zion! They were God’s chosen people, in God’s dwelling place... how could this be

happening to them? Up to now, the people had turned their back on God and now they were complaining that they had been abandoned. I think it was this attitude of entitlement and arrogance that so upset Jeremiah.

And the people still didn't get it. In their minds, God had deserted them! They didn't see this as a problem they had created for themselves. God had just disappeared... So, rather than looking to God or even to each other for solutions, they turned to other gods, to idols, to the ones who had promised a quick fix – a balm of Gilead, a physician or god that would hold a miracle cure... You can tell by Jeremiah's lament that he is upset and, as a prophet, he is presumably expressing God's feelings about the whole situation as well.

There is grief:

"I wish my head were a well of water
and my eyes fountains of tears
So I could weep day and night
for casualties among my dear, dear people."

And there is also frustration and anger:

"At times I wish I had a wilderness hut,
a backwoods cabin,
Where I could get away from my people
and never see them again.
They're a faithless, feckless bunch,
a congregation of degenerates."

Grief, frustration, anger – but, noticeably, he is not saying, "I told you so!"

Can you understand this mix of emotions? Jeremiah isn't just weeping for the people. He is ranting. Have you ever felt like this? Can you imagine someone you love ending up in a situation

that you warned them about, that you tried to protect them from but they wouldn't listen? I think it is an experience that is felt most keenly by parents. I am reminded of a parent whose child has taken a dark path – perhaps fallen in with a bad crowd, committed a crime or maybe gotten into drugs. Even if we haven't experienced it personally, we have known other parents or heard the stories of those who have lived through this horror.

As parents, we do our best to raise each of our children well... we teach them right from wrong... warn them about the pitfalls in the world... try to stop them when they seem to be heading for trouble... deliver the tough messages when they need them... we protect them, love them... and yet, sometimes they still fall off the rails...

And should something like this happen with one of our own, all those emotions are there – grief, frustration, anger... We rant, we cry, we beg them to change, we pray for some intervention that will keep them safe, or keep them out of jail, or even just keep them alive... Even through the anger and disappointment, the fact remains that they are still our child and we still love them. We don't just turn our backs and walk away with a sigh. We don't say, "Oh well, that's really too bad. Not my fault, though. I didn't put the drugs in her hands." Not when it is one of our own children. We can't, because we are emotionally involved. We love them! The same is true of Jeremiah. He loves the people. He wants only the best for them – and he knows that God loves them too. God and Jeremiah are grief-stricken, just as a parent would be for a child. Jeremiah and God are emotionally involved with the people of Judah.

Continuing with the metaphor of loving parents, we think there should be something we can do to make it all better... We start with reasoning, we cajole... and if that doesn't work, we get mad! And then maybe we move to trying to control through punishments or threats. "You're grounded!" ... "If you are going to spend your money on that, then I will take away your money!" ... and the more we try to control them, the more they move away from us, and they often blame us for the predicament they are in.

The people of Jeremiah's time were much the same. They didn't like being restricted by the laws of Moses or the advice of Jeremiah. They didn't see these things as a map or guide to a

healthy community. They saw them as restraints holding them back from the good life. So, they turned away. They traded the worship of God for the worship of other gods – gods that seemed more shiny and more fun, gods that didn't expect so much work. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Sounds like human nature.

This parental angst is what I hear in Jeremiah's rant. Much as the people think God has deserted them, that's not the message that Jeremiah sending. He has not said, "You're right, I give up, God has given up on you. God has left the world. You are done for." No, Jeremiah isn't moping in a corner. He is still trying to wake the people up.

It's human nature, I think, when we've hit the wall, to look for someone or something else to blame, to expect someone else to find the solutions without making us do the hard work, without disturbing our comfort. The more comfortable we are, in fact, the harder it is to convince us to do something. It's a truth we see in social justice advocacy all the time. The closer someone is to the margins, the more willing it seems they are to put themselves out there – to protest, to write letters, to go on strike or camp out on Parliament Hill. Those of us who are privileged are willing to help, of course, but we would rather write a cheque or support a fundraiser than get our hands dirty – and we certainly don't often see ourselves as having any blame for the problem in the first place. We care – but we aren't as invested. After all, it wasn't me who put children in residential schools or started the war in Ukraine, or raised rents so high that people can't afford food...

The people of Jeremiah's time traded the familiar, maybe old-fashioned, worship of God for gods with new and shiny promises of happiness, and prosperity, and protection without all the restrictions and effort. Isn't it interesting though, that when those new shiny gods failed to keep their promises, the people were quick to turn the blame on the one they had rejected? "Why has God deserted us?" they cry.

What about us today? What new shiny gods are calling for the attention of the world? We know for certain that church attendance has gone down. It's a concern of every denomination and faith tradition these days. "I am spiritual, but not religious," is a statement we often hear

from people who don't put aside time to worship in community. "I can worship God better in the woods or on the golf course than I can in a church sanctuary," is another explanation often used... I agree, you can worship God in places other than this... "But do you?" I want to ask... I wonder how many of us actually work at building a relationship with God – or however you describe the spiritual presence in the world – without setting aside the time or making the effort to nurture that relationship...

Jeremiah is emotionally involved with the world – with all of God's creation – and so, when things go wrong, he laments – he cries, he rants, he pleads, he gets angry and frustrated – not because he hates the world but exactly because he loves it – just as God loves it.

"The opposite of love is not hate; [the opposite of love is] indifference," said Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel in 1986; "because of indifference, one dies before one actually dies... to be [at] the window and watch people being sent to concentration camps or being attacked in the street and do nothing, that's being dead."

Indifference... sounds to me like not getting emotionally involved.

We certainly can't accuse Jeremiah of being indifferent. Jeremiah loved. His pleading, weeping, correcting, and rebuking are tokens of that love, just as the pleading, weeping, correcting and rebuking of a wayward child are tokens of a parent's love. When you look at it this way, you begin to see the indifference around us. You begin to see the indifference that is all too common within us. You begin to see, by contrast, a bit of the love of God. God certainly isn't indifferent. Jeremiah, like his God, loves the people. If you are like Jeremiah, you would be ranting too.

"At times I wish I had a wilderness hut,
a backwoods cabin,
Where I could get away from my people
and never see them again.

They're a faithless, feckless bunch,
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– not because he despises them but because he wishes better for them. Just like a parent can't stand by and watch their child destroy their life without getting emotionally involved, Jeremiah can't stand by and watch the people he loves destroy everything around them. It's all a part of loving them. He wishes for them the kin-dom that God dreams for his beloved world... and he can't stand quietly by while they destroy it. This isn't the soft weeping of a cry-baby; this is the full-out ugly cry of someone who is torn apart.

So... where's the hope in Jeremiah?

"Is there no balm in Gilead?" he asks, "Isn't there a doctor in the house?"

I don't believe Jeremiah is begging God to swoop down and take care of the problem. I think he is asking the people to look to themselves, to the gifts they already possess – the gifts that God encourages them to see, the gifts we become aware of when we build that relationship with God and when we build relationships with each other.

The problem arises when we forget to look beyond our own self, when we forget that we are all a part of this big creation – not just the people, but all living things, all of the rich resources that are here for us... when we think one person, or one family, or one nation, is entitled to own any part of it for just their own gain... when we think that all the responsibility falls on one person or group of people... when we hoard our love for just ourselves or the small group around us that looks and thinks the way we do, rather than spreading it widely and liberally like a balm over everyone and everything... when we stop being emotionally involved with the whole magnificent, complex, and sometimes scary world we live in... when we stop being emotionally involved with God who wishes all good things for us, for all of us.

There is a doctor in the house! In fact, we know there are untold numbers of them in the world – with so much healing wisdom if we take the time to look and listen, if we take the time to work together rather than in competition. There is a balm in Gilead! We hold it in our very

hands and the good news is that it multiplies infinitely if we take it out of our own pockets and spread it around. You may not think your small dollop is enough to change the world, but when we each love enough to share what we have and offer comfort... when we take on the responsibility to recognize where the wounds stem from... when we take the initiative to do what we can... and when we nurture our faith in God who has a wonderful plan in store for all of us... your small dollop can be the beginning of a healing balm for the whole world.

I think the challenge is to be as emotionally involved as Jeremiah, with the world, with all of creation, not just our own small place in it – and to persevere long enough to change the ugly crying to tears of joy. May it be so. Amen.

Let's take a quiet moment to reflect on the message this weeping, ranting prophet, Jeremiah, has for us in this modern world.