

**Is There No Balm in Gilead?**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Jeremiah 8:19-9:1**  
**September 18, 2016**

Ever since the days of Abraham, Israel had been a covenant people: God and God's children bound in commitment to one another. The sixth chapter of Deuteronomy offers a succinct summary of Israel's responsibilities in its covenant with YHWH:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

As the little nation grew, several resources emerged to help Israel remain a covenant people. Chief among these resources were the Tabernacle, which later became the Temple, and the Levites, the priests appointed to be stewards of Israel's faith. The Temple was the place where God dwelled on earth. And it was good to have God in this place! God blessed Israel. The Psalmist proclaims:

For a day in thy courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.  
For the Lord God is a sun and shield;  
he bestows favor and honor.  
No good thing does the Lord withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.  
O Lord of hosts,  
blessed is the man who trusts in thee!

Inside the Temple, the priesthood served as Israel's moral compass. The priesthood not only attended to the pastoral needs of the people, but they also offered a check and balance to the overreach of the high and mighty. Samuel put an end to the corruption of Eli's sons, Nathan rebuked King David for his abuses of power, and Elijah humbled King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and the prophets of Baal.

Temple and priesthood worked in tandem to keep Israel a covenant people.

And then came the Assyrians. In the Eighth Century, their mighty armies swept in through the North, eventually conquering the Northern Kingdom, and leaving Judah, the Southern Kingdom, significantly weakened. For a brief period of time, the Assyrians turned to more pressing military engagements with Egypt and other rivals, and Judah was lured into a false sense of security. During the reign of King Josiah, prosperity and peace returned, and the Temple and its people thrived. But it was short-lived, and eventually, the Assyrians, as well as the Egyptians and Babylonians would weaken Israel beyond repair.

In their fear and insecurity, the people of Israel refused to put their faith in YHWH. Instead they put their faith in powerful kings by paying tributes to the Egyptians and Babylonians. Many worshiped foreign Gods and idols, including Baal. More than anything, Israel refused to Love God with heart, soul, and mind. Nor did Israel keep God's commandments, or teach them to their children, or post them on their doors.

In today's lection, the prophet Jeremiah sits in a hopeless city, the after-effects of avoiding covenant-living. If war hasn't ravaged the neighborhood it's about to. New rulers, cruel rulers, are coming to Judah. Gone are the good times. Gone are the good jobs. But it's more than that: gone, it seems, is the goodness of humanity. Gone, it seems, is decency. Gone, it seems, is the covenant. The prophet proclaims:

My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.

*I hear the cry of my people in every corner near and far:*

"Is the Lord not in Zion, Is her king not in her?"

*And I imagine God replies:*

(Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign Gods?)

*And I hear the people cry:*

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

*And I imagine God replies:*

For the hurt of my poor people, I am hurt,

I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

Jeremiah aches. A people has been told over and over and over again of its covenant, and of the responsibilities that come with such a covenant. And time and again, despite the signs of decay, the people have not listened. And now, when it's too late, when the harvest has already come in, the people are finally paying attention? Too late. Josiah's kingdom will never look the same. Jerusalem and the Temple will never look the same, assuming they even remain standing at all.

But Jeremiah doesn't ache alone. He senses that God aches as well. And collectively, I think God AND Jeremiah ask this question:

Is there no balm in Gilead?

Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

Sharon Peebles Burch asserts that this healing balm, or this physician for Israel's wounds is the Church or the Temple establishment. And I agree! Jeremiah AND God wonder where those appointed to be God's voice have been. Somewhere along the way, the priesthood ceased to be the moral compass that Israel needed. Ritual atonement became transactional. Crooked priests skimmed off of Temple Offerings. Temple establishment cozied up to the politicians, and before long the privilege of power became way more important than demanding God's righteousness. Shouts of dissent, calls for righteousness, Psalms of acclamation for YHWH all became muffled; covenant language was reduced to background music, something you said, but not something you were expected to live into.

And in reflecting on the shambles of the Temple and its priesthood, Jeremiah weeps for the people. And God weeps, too. And our passage ends abruptly. No reconciliation. No words of hope. No warm, happy feeling at the end.

This may be where our lection ends, but it's not where our story ends. Eventually, Jeremiah will dry his tears. It's not that his life will get any easier. It's not that the exile will be prevented. It's not that the Temple will be magically repaired overnight. And it's not that the people of Israel will suddenly flip on their covenant switch. They won't. And the hard times will get harder.

But Jeremiah will stake his claim to Israel. He'll buy a plot of land. "And one day," he says, "one day, my children will once more live in covenant on this land. One day, there will once more be a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole."

We don't like to admit it, but Jeremiah's pointed question could be addressed to the people of any age, and particularly ours.

In North Carolina, one in four school children are food insecure. That means they wonder where their next meal will come from, if it comes at all. And in cities like Raleigh and Charlotte, on any given night, 500-1,000 of our neighbors have no place to call home. And yet in every one of our homes, our refrigerators have Tupperware containers full of left-overs, and rooms that go unused.

Here in our state, we have a legislature that has enacted laws, repeatedly, that have intentionally sought to remove the basic dignities and rights of our most vulnerable citizens. Marriage rights, voting rights, unemployment benefits, protections from spousal abuse, even the right to choose a bathroom, have all been denied or heavily reduced under the guise of religious morality. And yet the biggest outcry in all of this is not the lack of respect afforded to ALL of our neighbors, but rather the removal of an All-Star game, and the ACC Tournament. Would that we cared about people as much as we did about basketball!!!

And across our country, young men of color experience a different America than their white peers. Too often police brutality, incarceration, discrimination, and lack of opportunity are the norm, not the exception. And once more, the biggest outcry is not about the lack of respect our neighbors have been afforded, it's about their audacity to demand justice. It's about their audacity to own a hashtag, or God forbid, interrupt a national anthem that demands our allegiance to the status quo.

Here in Charlotte, and across our state, and across our nation, our most vulnerable cry out: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" Our neighbors, near and far, cry out: "Where is the Church?"

People of Sardis, Clarence Jordan reminds us that "God's call to obedience can be heard among the tumult, above the bands, and above the flag-waving." God's call to obedience can be heard, even when it disrupts our comfort.

As people of faith, we must decide if our voices will join in God's call for obedience. We must decide if our words, if our actions, if our love, if our last ounce of energy, will be used to bring about God's world. And if our answer to such a call is yes, we'd better be sure we're heard.

Even in a world that seemed lost from covenant, Jeremiah had the courage and the faith and the hope to stake a claim for God's future.

People of Sardis, we live in the midst of too much brokenness. But such brokenness cannot and should not overcome our commitment to God's covenant. If we are to be God's people, than this must be a place where we love God and neighbor with our whole selves, and where we keep the words that God has commanded in our hearts, where we recite them to our children and talk about them when we are at home and away, and when we lie down and rise.

Jeremiah hoped in covenant. And out of such hope sprung a renewed priesthood. Zechariah and Zerubbabel raised a new Temple; John called the people to repentance, Jesus fulfilled the law, Peter and James started a church, Paul spread it across the world, and through the ages Augustine and Luther and Francis and Teresa and Smith and Helwys and Williams and Bonheiffer and Day and King and so many others responded to God's call for obedience. Our saints ensured that temple and priesthood performed their duty: to be our moral compass, to lead us on the journey of covenant-living.

People of Sardis, should we choose to claim such a legacy, should we choose to make this place, and its people advocates of justice, and an entity that lives with God's covenant in our hearts, than perhaps we too, can sing with confidence:

There is a balm in Gilead  
To make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead  
To heal the sin-sick soul

May it always be so!