

Annual Conference 2022 Sermon
Service of Remembrance
Preacher: Grace Han
Sermon: A Balm of Gilead
Scripture: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

18 My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick.

19 Listen! The cry of the daughter of my people from far and wide in the land:

“Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?”

(“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?”)

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

21 For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken, I mourn, and horror has seized me.

22 Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

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

9 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 the daughter of my people!

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Friends, we gather tonight for our Service of Remembrance
Each year, we begin Annual Conference
With a worship service dedicated to remembering.

We remember specifically those people in our Annual Conference
who have died in the past year.
We celebrate their incredible lives and ministries
We remember their legacies, stories, and journeys
And proclaim the promise of resurrection that claims them and us.

But we also recognize that tonight’s service comes
in the midst of an extended season of pain and loss.
We gather in-person for the first time in three years
Because a global pandemic completely changed our world.
We come heavy with grief mourning 6 million lives worldwide
(and that’s thought to be a significant undercount)
We gather as violence motivated by racism continues to plague our country.
We gather in the wake of school shootings and mass shootings
We gather as war rages on in Europe
And we gather as our churches and denomination face division,
struggling to find a path forward.

In many ways, this would be a good year to skip over remembering
And just fast forward to looking ahead
To 5 years down the road when COVID is a distant memory
and all our denominational schisms are resolved.

In fact, I was talking with a friend of mine a few months ago
When we hit our two year anniversary of COVID-shut downs
And I asked her what she wanted to remember from the last few years
And she said very honestly:
Nothing. I want to remember nothing.
I wish I could just erase the last few years
so we never have to think about it again.

I wonder if any of us can relate to that
The last few years have been really really hard, to say the least
They have been painful and exhausting and chaotic
We have felt lost and disoriented
Our hearts have been broken over and over again
We have been overwhelmed with the grief of loss

And the question for us tonight
as we gather for our Service of Remembrance is this:
What does it mean to remember in the midst of crisis and grief and loss?
What is it that we want to remember?
Is it even worth remembering?

But what we'll also see tonight
Is that it is precisely in our most difficult moments
In the shadows of the darkest valleys
That God is with us
And just as God's presence was a Balm for the Israelite people in our Scriptures generations
ago,
God's presence is a Balm for us today.

And that is worth remembering.

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Our passage comes from the book of Jeremiah
At first glance, it may not seem like the most encouraging text
for a Service of Remembrance
After all this passage is really sad and depressing
there doesn't seem to be any good news!

There are lots of questions in this passage, but no answers
And there's no conclusion at the end of the passage
The passage ends with the prophet crying out
*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 people!*

In many ways, it might have been more satisfying to choose a passage at the end of Jeremiah
When God brings healing and restoration to the Israelite people
and makes a new covenant written on the hearts:
I will be their God and they shall be my people.
When the good news is obvious and clear and clean
God won, the end.

But I also wonder if our passage for today may speak more to our current reality
After all, we haven't quite arrived at our conclusion
COVID still won't go away
War and violence rage on
We aren't even sure what our Annual Conference will look like next year!

And, there may be more happening in this passage than we may see at first glance
Something happening here that brings hope and good news to a hurting people
A balm for their sin-sick souls.

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Before we get to that,
it's important to understand the context for this passage.

Our passage was written during an incredibly difficult time in Israel's history
Arguably the greatest crisis in Israel's history
The unthinkable happened:
Jerusalem had fallen,
The temple was destroyed
(remember the temple was the dwelling place of God, God's house)
And God's people were exiled to Babylon, far from home
Things went from bad to worse
And just when they thought it couldn't get any worse
It got even worse
(Think 2020 to 2021—
Remember when 2020 was deemed the "dumpster fire year"
And then 2021 happened?)
That's what it was like for the Israelite people.

And the Israelite people didn't know what to do.

The world they once knew was gone
The foundation upon which they built their entire lives and faith
was crumbling before their eyes
The promised land had become a curse
Even the house of God had fallen.
In Psalm 137: we hear their desperation:
*By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.*

And in our passage for today,
The Prophet Jeremiah looked out on his people,
He saw their desperation, fear, frustration, sadness—

And all he could do was cry out to God:
*My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick!
Is the Lord not in Zion? Is the king not in her?
For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken,
I mourn, and horror has seized me.*

I imagine Jeremiah beating his chest in lament as he cried out to God:
Wondering out loud:
Where are you God?
Have you forgotten about us?
Do you not hear the cry of your people?
Can't you see that we need you?

Notice here that Jeremiah doesn't try to put on a brave face
He doesn't try to sugar coat things or pretend things are okay
He doesn't offer answers or solutions
Instead Jeremiah cries out, demands, laments, and mourns
He even questions if God could actually heal God's people:

*Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then has the health of the daughter of my people
not been restored?*

What we see in this passage is the cry of a heart broken prophet,
The bitter frustration of someone who has reached the end of his rope
The desperate weeping of someone who has lost everything.

I imagine many of us can relate to Jeremiah here,
In his cries,

We see the tears of a spouse who mourns their husband or wife or partner after sharing a life together.

In his cries we see the grief of losing a loved one to COVID without being able to say goodbye in person.

In his cries are the wail of a mother cradling her child killed in a school shooting
In his cries are the deep emptiness of a young person overwhelmed with anxiety and depression

In his cries are the quiet sobs of families in Ukraine who have fled their homes in fear of their safety.

See, we don't have to try too hard to relate to the Israelites here.

Jeremiah's laments are ones we are all too familiar with.

My guess is that we have all prayed some version of this prayer in the last few years

Wondering: where are you God?

Crying out: Is there a balm in Gilead?

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But despite the hopelessness of this passage
In the midst of the lament and pain clearly present here
There's something else here too
Because embedded in this question:
Is there a Balm in Gilead?
Also lies a powerful answer

If we look carefully at our text
There's something remarkable happening here
that we may have missed at first glance

The passage begins with Jeremiah speaking:
My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick
Hark the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land!

But if we keep reading,
at some point it seems like it's no longer Jeremiah speaking
but God speaking:
Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?

And if we keep reading even further,
It seems like the Israelites people are also speaking,
expressing their own sorrow and grief:
The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

While at first glance we assumed that it was Jeremiah crying out by himself

If we look more closely, what we see is that
at times God is speaking,
and at times the Israelites are speaking.

And the more we read this passage,
the less clear it becomes who is speaking
And by the end, the last verse:

It's not clear if it's Jeremiah speaking, God speaking, or the Israelite people speaking.
*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 people!*

If you're confused, don't stress, you aren't alone.
In fact, even Biblical scholars have struggled to identify who is speaking when in this passage.

But I wonder if that's precisely the point
This passage is a jumble of voices,
one on top of the other,
bleeding together until it's not clear who is crying out,
who is angry, who is frustrated, who is lamenting,
and who is weeping.

But it is in this cacophony of voices,
that we see a powerful truth.

See in the midst of great suffering, great pain and great loss
What we see is that
God is crying WITH God's people
God is lamenting WITH Jeremiah for the brokenness of their poor people
God is weeping for God's people
*Oh 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.*

See, rather than being abandoned by God,
as the people assumed
God was right there with them.
Rather than being punished by God,
as Jeremiah assumed
God was weeping with them.

God loved God's people so much that
In our grief, God grieved with us
In our crying out, God lamented and mourned with us
In our pain, God stayed so close to us

That at times our voices overlapped
Our prayers and laments becoming one.

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What we see is that in the midst of the most difficult time in Israel's history
When it seemed like everything was falling apart
When the Israelites were filled with grief and pain
When they couldn't see through their tears
In the midst of that, God was with them.

And that was precisely the balm that the Israelite people were searching for:
when Jeremiah asked: *Is there a Balm in Gilead?*
He was asking:
Is there anything that can bring healing and relief for my people?
Is there anything that can make this pain go away?

And while the Israelite people couldn't see it at the time,
What we can clearly see in our passage today is God's faithful response:
I am with you, always.
I am with you when you are in Jerusalem
And I am with you in Babylon.
I am with you when things are good
And I am with you when things fall apart
I am with you when you are grieving
and I am with you when you are celebrating

I am with you through global pandemics
and denominational divisions
I am with you when you are surrounded by family and friends,
or alone in a hospital bed
I am with you with you always, to the end of the days.

That's the promise we see in the 23rd Psalm
The reason we read the 23rd Psalm at Services of Remembrance
Is because this Psalm reminds us that
God is with us not only in good times but also in difficult times
Whether we walk besides still waters or in the valley of the shadow of death
Our God is always with us.

Too often in our pain, in our struggles
We assume God is far from us
That God doesn't care about us
That God must have abandoned us

That's why we are going through difficult times.

But what we see in this passage is the complete opposite
That it is precisely in the midst of the most difficult crisis God's people had faced
God was right there with them
Crying out, weeping, mourning, and grieving

And God's presence was the balm of Gilead
That was needed to heal, soothe, and restore God's people.

And what we know is that this was not a one time deal
We know that God loved us so much that God became like us
Incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ
To be with us, present among us
To live our lives and die our death
So we could be resurrected with him
Into the promise of new life
That is the balm of Gilead.

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The good news for us today is that this balm is no less present for us today
Than it was for our Israelite ancestors all those years ago.
See, despite the trials and tribulations of 2020, 2021, arguably 2022
What we also know was that God was powerfully present with us in the last few years.

And we know that because
despite the most difficult crisis most of us will ever face in our lifetimes
We also saw how God's presence enabled us and strengthened us in ways we never expected

Despite a global pandemic
our churches found ways to gather together—online, outdoors, masked, distanced, on ZOOM, in
parking lots and everything in between
We learned to live-stream worship and embrace technology (if that's not the work of the Holy
Spirit, I don't know what is!)
We figured out that church was not about the walls of a building
but about a community that gathers together no matter what.
We came to realize how much we need each other,
that we cannot live in isolation.
We learned we are more resilient than we thought
and that we can do hard things (sometimes)

While the last few years was far from perfect,
What we also know is that

God's presence guided us and strengthened us in ways we never expected
God's presence empowered us and entrusted us to build something new
God's presence was the balm that we needed
To pave a path towards healing and restoration.

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Which bring us back to our question about
what it means to remember in the midst of grief and loss.

See, while our tendency is to want to forget difficult moments of our lives
It is precisely in times of grief and loss that we need to remember

We need to remember that it was in the midst of grief and loss
When we were overwhelmed with mourning
That God was powerfully near to us.

We need to remember that it was when we felt most abandoned by God
That God was crying out with us, weeping and lamenting

We need to remember that despite our circumstances,
our God will never leave us or forsake us
Because God is with us always, to the end of the days.

See we owe it to ourselves and our future generations to remember
So that the next time we face a crisis
And we cry out wondering:
Is there no balm in Gilead?
We don't forget the answer.

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Friends, there is much about the last few years we'd rather forget
The pain and grief and sorrow we faced was real and difficult
and should not be overlooked or minimized
But what we also know is that through it all,
our God was with us
God is present with us.

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

Let us pray together.