

"My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick."¹

"For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me."²

"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!"³

What profound pain. 'I wish I could cry unlimited tears. I wish I could cry 24/7.' It's hard to imagine a higher level of pain than that.

Sometimes we think that God sits above everyday human emotions, that God is immune and oblivious to human pain. It's especially easy to think that way when you're in pain yourself. 'I'm in pain. Therefore, that obviously means that God doesn't care.'

Yet, hear God's words through Jeremiah: 'I am hurt, I mourn, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.' Why? 'Because my people are hurting.'

Remember, when God became incarnate in the person of Jesus, he didn't magically float around 12 inches above the sorrow and the pain of life. He experienced pain fully. His heart broke. He cried real tears. He died a real death, a very painful death.

If you're in pain, if you're suffering, if you're struggling, it's often tempting to think that God is distant, that God doesn't care. The word of God through Jeremiah reminds us. God is there. God does care. And his heart is breaking right alongside yours.

That's half of the message of our lesson this morning. God shares our pain and grief and sorrow.

But there's more we need to hear. And this is perhaps the tougher piece for us to hear. There are three other verses in this section woven into the three verses describing God and Jeremiah's pain. And we need to listen to them as well.

The first of these three verses describes the people's complaint but also gives God's complaint.

"Hark, the cry of my poor people from far and wide in the land: 'Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?'"⁴

In the midst of destruction, in the midst of having their nation wiped out and their capital city destroyed, they ask, "Is the LORD not in Zion?" In other words, where is God?

¹ Jer 8:18

² Jer 8:21

³ Jer 9:1

⁴ Jer 8:19

And then, they ask, "Is the King not in Zion?" In other words, where are the human institutions we've trusted in, that we've looked to for security?

Yet, God asks, "Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?"⁵

God is basically saying, 'Yes, I'm in pain.' But God is also saying, 'My people are asking where I am. They're asking where I've gone. And yet my people are the ones who have turned away from me. My people are the ones who have put their trust in idols instead of me.'

It's like the old bumper sticker, "If God seems far away, who moved?" If God seems distant, but you've turned your back on God, if you've let your love for God grow cold, if you've turned to placing your ultimate trust in power or possessions or pleasure, then maybe you need to reexamine your life and your relationship to God.

Maybe some repentance, some change, some turning toward God is in order. In our baptismal service we always ask, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ?" But we also ask, "Whenever you fall into sin, will you repent and RE-turn to the Lord?"

The message from Jeremiah is, if you feel that you're in the darkness, some self-examination and repentance may be in order.

Then, in the next verse, the people say, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."⁶

This is such a wonderful statement. 'We've waited all summer. God, we've waited several months. God, we've given you 90 whole days, and you haven't jumped in and fixed things.' That's such a typically human statement. We want it fixed, and we want it fixed now. We want you to do something now.

It turns out that God will turn things around. After Jeremiah's time, God will bring his people back from exile. And God does it... 49 years later. Not a few days or weeks or months later. Not even a few years later. But almost 5 decades later. It reminds us that God's time scale is not the same as ours. God may not always act as quickly as we'd like.

If you're living in a dark time, the message here is that you may be there for a while. God's plans may take a while to play out. You might not get the instant gratification you want. There might even be spiritual lessons for you to learn in the darkness. But you still need to wait expectantly for God to act, and trust that he will act, that he will bring light, in his own good time.

The last of the three remaining verses gives us one more spiritual clue to dealing with dark times.

⁵ Jer 8:19

⁶ Jer 8:20

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"⁷

The balm of Gilead is resin from a balsam tree. It was used in ancient medicines and perfumes.

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

This verse has often been misinterpreted. In fact, Edgar Allen Poe gets it wrong. In one of the stanzas of "The Raven" the man asks the bird,

*'Is there— is there balm in Gilead?—
tell me— tell me, I implore!'
Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'*

The raven's message is that there is no healing, that there is no hope, there is no balm in Gilead. But that's not what Jeremiah's saying.

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" Jeremiah is not asking if there is a balm.

Rather, he's basically saying, 'Don't you remember that balm is available in Gilead?' It's not a question of 'is there a balm?' It's a question of 'don't you remember that there is a balm?'

'Don't you know that there is healing balm available in Gilead? Don't you know that there are physicians there to help you?'

It's kind of like traveling to the M.D. Anderson or the Mayo Clinic for specialized treatment. Don't you know there are places you can go to receive healing?

And if you know such places exist, why aren't you going there?

When Jeremiah asks, "Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" he's basically saying, 'If healing is available, then why aren't my poor people seeking it, why aren't they looking for it?' The spiritual message is that there is hope, there is light, there is healing that can come from God. The tragedy Jeremiah points to is that his people are not seeking that kind of healing.

In his day, seeking healing in Gilead demanded travel, demanded leaving your comfort zone. Spiritually the same thing holds true. To find God's healing, you may have to make a spiritual journey to a new place. You may have to leave your comfort zone behind. You may have to sally forth, trusting in God more than you have before.

⁷ Jer 8:22

But God is there. God is compassionate. And God offers hope. God offers healing. God offers light.

You may need to make a change in your life.

You may need to wait, it may not come as fast as you'd like.

But the message of Jeremiah is that, even in the midst of great pain and grief and darkness, hope is always there. Edgar Allen Poe gets it wrong. But actually, the old Afro-American spiritual gets it right:

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

There is a balm in Gilead.

God's healing is available, if only we'll seek it out.

In the darkness, seek that healing.

Help us O God. Make us whole.