

## Yes, There Is a Balm

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1    Luke 7:36-50

Rev. Dr. Nancy E. J. Gladden

It was a slender hardback, the cover worn. Clara Morrow turned it over. "There is a balm in Gilead," she read from the back, "to make the wounded whole---"

"There's power enough in Heaven/To cure a sin-sick soul." Armand Gamache finished the phrase. "It's from an old spiritual."

Clara stared at the back cover. "Do you believe it, Armand?"

"Yes." He took the book from her and grasped it so tightly in one hand she half expected the words to squeeze out.

"Then what are you struggling with?"

When he didn't answer, she had her answer.

The problem wasn't with the words, it was with the wounds. Old wounds. And maybe a sin-sick soul. (Penny, *The Long Way Home*)

Clara and Armand are two characters from Louise Penny's book *The Long Way Home*, number 11 of the Chief Inspector Armand Gamache series. Clara had just joined Armand on the bench overlooking the village green in a small village in Quebec called Three Pines – a village so remote it doesn't show up on any map of Quebec, or any GPS. Clara had come to ask his help in finding her husband Peter. Peter and Clara are both artists. Peter has enjoyed a famed career for years. Clara's even greater artistic brilliance had only recently been discovered. And Peter was jealous. Didn't want to be, but was. And even though he loved Clara, he couldn't stop himself from belittling her work, undermining opportunities for her in the art world. Peter is a wounded, sin-sick soul. And he's not the only one.

Whether it's in a work of fiction, or in real life, there are wounds enough to go around. There are sins enough to sicken any soul --- even yours and mine.

During the last year, I re-read my Louise Penny books. When I read *The Long Way Home*, the refrain of the old spiritual kept going through my mind:

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;  
there is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Recently, I came across the words to that old spiritual, and the song led me to Jeremiah, which is its Scriptural base, and his lament "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Thinking about the verses in Jeremiah, I remembered the story in Luke of the sinful woman, a person whose life could use some balm, and whose presence at the dinner table of Simon reveals more than one sin-sick soul. The old spiritual insists there is a

balm in Gilead. And so, the question Clara asked Armand could be asked of us, “Do you believe it?” And if, like Armand, we answer yes, then what? Or where? Or who?

Jeremiah is often labeled “the weeping prophet,” and there is no passage that warrants that label for him better than this one. Jeremiah was called to speak the word of the Lord to the unrepentant people of Judah who put confidence in the temple and sacrificial rituals automatically to save them, regardless of their provoking God to anger by their idols, and despite God repeatedly sending prophets to warn them. Sin-sick, and didn’t even realize it.

The people of Judah are crying out because of a military threat from the north. They are scared, there is political finger-pointing, and there is uncertainty. They don’t want to hear what Jeremiah has to say, partly because they just can’t fathom that this could be happening to them. They are God’s chosen people. They have the Law and the Temple. They don’t want Jeremiah pointing out any fault with them.

The people of Judah aren’t the only ones lamenting the state of things. Jeremiah himself is not immune from the suffering that’s going on. His lament is for his own suffering, for the pain of the people, and even for the betrayal of God. He says, “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.” “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.”

Out of this chaotic, threatening, uncertain time, questions are asked:

By the people – Is the Lord not in Zion?

By God – Why have they provoked me to anger with their images?

By Jeremiah – Is there no balm in Gilead?

Just to clarify for those who may be wondering, a balm is a soothing, healing substance. And Gilead was a place known for the tree that made this soothing ointment, or balm. Jeremiah’s asking, “Can we get a little help here? Is there no relief for the suffering, for the miserable and uncertain situation of Judah? And where’s the needed repentance?”

Jeremiah tries to affirm that God is, indeed, in Zion. The problem is the people only want to hear assurances that God will protect them, but Jeremiah is pointing out that assurances about God protecting isn’t the whole truth about God. The Lord *is* in Zion, however, with implications quite different from the people’s expectations. Judah’s chosen-ness as the people of God is for a God-intended purpose that they had long-ignored. They have bought into a gospel of cheap grace. Judah has a sin-sick soul.

There’s a lot of brokenness in this passage of Scripture. And goodness knows, there is a lot of brokenness in our world today, in our own country, and maybe in our own life. So much anger, so many cries for justice, demands for respect, social media bullying, strained or broken relationships, political finger-pointing and blaming, a

pandemic that turned the world upside down, extremely high levels of stress as everyone tries to navigate a new reality...and the exhausting list just goes on and on. We might ask, "Is there no balm in Pollocksville, in Jones County, in North Carolina, in our country, in the world?" We wonder, don't we?

There is no easy answer, no cheap grace, for the healing of God's people in Jeremiah's day, and there are no easy answers today...but there is a hope for balm. Yes! There is a balm. That's the gift we are offered in Luke's story of the sinful woman.

She appears while Jesus is at dinner with a Pharisee named Simon. Simon is upset with her presence because she is a known sinner, and at least in Simon's mind, if Jesus was who so many claimed him to be, he would know she was a sinner, and so would reject her presence and her actions at the table. The point of Luke's story is the contrast between the responses to Jesus of Simon and those of the sinful woman. Jesus doesn't dispute that the woman is a sinner. What he points out is that she has done for him what Simon as the host should have done, but didn't. He points out that she is aware of her sin-sick soul, and she has turned to the source of forgiveness and balm. And maybe there's more sickness in Simon's soul than Simon realizes.

Jeremiah points out that Yes, God was in Zion, but focusing only on God's protection simply because Judah was the people of God, was not the whole truth about God. Luke helps us see that another part of the truth about God is that God is the source of balm for sin-sick souls. There are a couple of things about this I hope we can carry with us:

1. Our sin is not the whole truth about us. We are God's children, we are loved, and because God has reached out his hand to us, repentance is possible, we can turn back to God, grasping his hand, knowing the depth of our sin, but also knowing the depth of God's love, and understanding God's love also includes a demand for justice. We can begin again to live as those to whom Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."
2. And that leads me to the second thought I hope we'll carry with us. Jesus tells the woman "Go in peace." Where is she to go to find that peace? Yes, certainly, she can carry the peace of Jesus in her heart, but can she now find acceptance and peace in her community? Where do forgiven people today go to know peace? Yes, God is with us and loves us, but that's not the whole truth about God for today's church. The church is called to be the place where people find acceptance and peace. And God calls you and me to help others know there is a balm, and even to be ones who offer balm to soothe the hurts and fatigue and anxiety of our time. And so, we're back to Jeremiah's question: Is there no balm in Gilead, or anywhere? And then, there's Clara's question: Do you believe it?

There's a woman who works part time and volunteers a lot of time for her church. As the coronavirus caused people to stay at home, she determined to write a handwritten note to each member of her church. She will tell you she struggles when it comes to writing notes, with knowing what to say. But this was her way of helping people stay in touch, of offering a word of hope and comfort. Yes, there is a balm.

There's the little girl in the UK who took it upon herself to learn sign language so she could say hello to their deaf sanitation worker and brighten his day. There's the minister who took tomato seedlings he grew to the local food pantry to be given out to those coming for assistance. Yes, there is a balm.

There are people who have not forgotten the ongoing needs of Hurricane Florence victims in our area, and who continue to bring help to bear on this old wound. Yes, there is balm.

There are churches in our East Community who are reaching out to offer Glimmers of Grace by collecting treats and other items to give hospital staffs, first responders, teachers, and others to encourage and support them. Yes, there is a balm.

Your assessment of your life and faith may leave you feeling broken or inadequate. Maybe there feels like a little sin-sickness in your soul. The unrest in our communities and country and world is surely an indication of sin-sick souls. And then a pandemic... it makes us wonder "Is there no balm?" Luke reminds us we worship a God who is the source of balm, who forgives and accepts, and who calls us to help others find balm for their sin-sick souls.

By the end of Louise Penny's book, *The Long Way Home*, Peter and Clara Morrow, and Armand Gamache, were all soothed with balm, not as might have been expected because, after all, there's not much healing in cheap grace. No one's sin is the whole truth about their life. The great difficulties of our day do not mean God is not present in our midst. Remember, Jesus answers Jeremiah's question. Yes, there is a balm...for you, and through you for others.

*The Long Way Home*, Louise Penny, 2014 Three Pines Creations NY, NY

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4, pp74-79.

Interpretation Commentaries – Jeremiah (R.E. Clements) and Luke (Fred B. Craddock)

"There Is a Balm in Gilead" African American spiritual