

Balm in Gilead

Now that I have announced that I am retiring at the end of this year, I find that I approach familiar lectionary readings with a different perspective. Today, for instance, I am more drawn to the depth of Jeremiah's grief than the parable of the dishonest manager. In previous weeks we heard Jeremiah tell of God's anger over how unfaithful the people of Israel have been. Elsewhere he laments over how rejected he is as a prophet. Today, however, Jeremiah expresses his deep sorrow over what has happened to the people – "my poor people," he calls them. He wishes that his head were a spring of water to unleash all of the tears that he wants to shed! As usual, music starts going through my head because Felix Mendelssohn used one of these verses to express the despair of famine in his great oratorio *Elijah*: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." The only glimmer of hope in this passage is the balm in Gilead.

Perhaps Jeremiah's grief speaks to me because of the transition I'm going through. Last Sunday during some of the special music in honor of Queen Elizabeth, there were a few rare moments when I wasn't expected to do anything. I was able to stop and look around, and as I did I thought to myself, "I'm going to miss this place." Trinity has been a blessing to me and to my family, as I've said before. As a former academic I thought about students graduating from college, leaving friends and familiar places for a future that is only dimly seen. I know it's the right time to retire, but that doesn't make it any easier.

I'm also mindful of the still unresolved grief many carry after two years of missed opportunities and lapsed relationships because of the pandemic. That's precisely why we are having a catered brunch after today's service. We need to be intentional about restoring connections with one another. I'm grateful for all of you who have come, and especially those who have invited others to be with them today. You are all welcome here as an essential part of the Body of Christ.

During communion we're going to pick up on Jeremiah's glimmer of hope and sing "There's a balm in Gilead." It's an old spiritual, dating to times of slavery. It has wonderful words for sorrowful people. "Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again." The second verse Christianizes Jeremiah's balm and ends even more hopefully. "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus, and say, 'He died for all.'"

That's where we end up as Christians, isn't it? As our prayer book's burial service says, even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. As many funerals as I've done – and I've done quite a few in the last ten years – that passage gets me *every* time. If we stubbornly persist at saying alleluia in the very presence of death, shouldn't we be even more joyful at the abundance of life that surrounds us?

So, yes, Jeremiah speaks to me. But the voice of Jesus is always stronger. I'm reminded in particular of a wonderful passage from the Gospel of Matthew that I pray every night during the service of Compline:
Come to me, all that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

May the balm in Gilead heal *your* soul, and may you always find your joy and rest in Jesus.

[Pentecost 15: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13.]