

There *is* a Balm in Gilead

Proper 20, Year C – Jeremiah 8:19 – 9:1

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 18, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

After last Sunday's service, I had several folks, *including* my dear wife, ask me why I didn't say anything about it being September 11th, the anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001. And maybe I should have, but as the week progressed, that's just not where my head kept going as I prepared for our worship.

It's not because I don't remember like everyone else where I was on that day. It has been said that the events of 9/11 are the same kind of seminal moment for this generation as the assassination of JFK was for the one before. Being old enough, just *barely*, to remember both, I can certainly understand that. I heard stories from several of you last week, before and after the service, about what happened in your own life that Thursday morning. I even shared my own once or twice: I was on my way to a meeting two hours west on I-80 when I heard the initial report on NPR that a plane had crashed into the Twin Towers. Since a single engine plane had accidentally crash landed near the White House not too long before, I remember thinking, "What an idiot! How can you crash into a skyscraper?" My opinion didn't change all that much when it was reported that it was a commercial airliner – until the second plane hit the second tower. Only when the news from the Pentagon revealed the enormity of the situation, did I turn back to prepare the Cathedral's black vestments for an extraordinary midday requiem mass.

It's not that I don't think we should take time to remember even now those that lost their lives, or their loved ones that day. The 265 people on the *four* planes, the 2,606 in the World Trade Center and the surrounding area, the 125 at the Pentagon, 2,996 men, women and children killed within the span of minutes, to make a point. Initially thinking the number even higher, we tolled the bell every thirty seconds for almost a *day and a half*. Last Sunday I even looked through the Prayer Book as we said our prayers, hoping to find something, anything that expressed the scope and scale of such a remembrance, but nothing seemed to fit, even fifteen years later.

It's not because I don't respect the fire fighters and the police and the medical personnel that rushed *into* the danger of fire and twisted metal to reduce and relieve the suffering of others. In the last fifteen years, September 11th has become, in some unofficial, but no less tangible way, what November 11th is for the veterans of our nation's armed forces. Perhaps someone has some ideas of how we can make our thankfulness known for those in our own community who *still* rush in every time that alarm sounds.

It's not that I think that things have gotten so much better *since* that day. For the last fifteen years, three quarters of my ministry as a priest, more than a quarter of it here with you, I have had to comment on a staccato rhythm of violence and bloodshed. Fort Hood. Sandy Hook. Boston. Aurora. San Bernardino. Charleston. Orlando. I don't know if we are *in fact* less secure than we once were, but I know it *seems* like that is the case, and I know that I'm not alone in that thinking.

I suppose that I *could* have found a way to weave our common remembrance into my sermon about the lost and found, into the prayers of this people, somewhere into our worship last Sunday. It's just that none of that was where my head kept going as I prepared.

Last week, and for weeks now, our readings have included lamentations, first from Isaiah and then from Jeremiah, bemoaning the sins of the People of God, beckoning their repentance and return to the Lord, bewailing their abandonment of faithfulness to God and to one another. Over and over, it has seemed to me almost appropriate to end our Old Testament readings with an interrogatory, "The Word of

the *Lord*?” And here again today, we end with the Prophet crying, “Is there *no* balm in Gilead?” “The Word of the *Lord*?”

In 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire had had enough of the political wrangling of the tiny nation-state that stood astride one of the chief trading lines of the ancient world, and laid siege to the capital city of Jerusalem, conquered it, and began the systematic dismantling of the government and the exile of anyone even capable of providing resistance.

It was the final stroke in nearly a century of devastation for the People of God. As one prophet after another called the People to repentance and reform, the northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians, and the kingly line of southern Judah was manipulated in subservience to first the Assyrians, then the Egyptians, and finally to the Babylonians who had defeated both those great powers. Isaiah wept for the ruination of the vineyard of God’s goodness, and Jeremiah, called from the womb to declare the word of the Lord, is left to beg, “*Is there no balm in Gilead?*”

We know that phrase from the old spiritual, where Jesus is the balm that makes the wounded whole, and heals the sin-sick soul. And though the coming of the Messiah was yet far in the future, Jeremiah was talking in a poetic and spiritual sense as well. But he was also talking about a very specific oil, carefully cultivated from the plants of a single garden in the sanctuary city of Jericho, and renown the world over for both its fragrance and its healing properties. It was likely the substance that the traders were carrying when Joseph was sold into Egypt by his brothers. It was costly enough to be listed among the precious gifts of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon. And it was among the spices and ointments used to prepare the righteous dead for burial. On the very eve of destruction, the Prophet cries out for the People of God to look to the gifts they have already been given for the binding up of the broken in body and in spirit.

You see, there is nothing, *nothing* really new in the world. We look around at all that is happening in our time, we look around, hastened, for good or ill, by 24/7, forty-channel coverage bringing us the latest gunman or bomber or war or execution or, or, or... and we ask, why doesn’t *somebody* do *something* about all this brokenness and suffering? “*Is there no balm in Gilead?*”

Last week, when I had the opportunity to call us all to remembrance of the defining disaster of our time, that’s just not where my head kept going. But this week as I thought about Jeremiah’s lament, I think I figured out why.

You see, there was *another* use for the balsam so painstakingly extracted from the plants in that one garden in Gilead. That precious ointment, that fragrant oil, the healing balm of Gilead was blended with purest olive oil and cassia and myrrh to make the oil with which the high priests and kings of the people of God were anointed. The balm of Gilead ran down Aaron’s beard, and over the head of the young shepherd, David. The oil identified and announced and empowered those chosen by God to serve him, and to serve his People.

And though perhaps you didn’t know it, that oil is still used today. Throughout the Church, since at least the fifth century, and every year at special liturgy right here in the Diocese of Kentucky, bishops in the apostolic succession blend and bless that same oil as the chrism that is used for the anointing at baptism. The oil identifies and announces and empowers those chosen by God to serve him, and to serve his People. That means that *you* have been anointed, that *you* have been chosen, that *you* have been empowered.

In the wake of the Orlando massacre, you may recall, quoting another prophet, I asked us all to write the vision of God’s goodness in our lives for those that need to know it in theirs. Don’t you see, that is not just idle talk, or some sort of theoretical abstraction. *We* have been *anointed* to that very purpose.

“*Is there no balm in Gilead?*” Yes. Yes. Yes, there is! And it is *you*!