

***“Making the Wounded Whole: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1” by Joseph McBrayer***

**Welcome & Prayer**

I am thankful to be here with you today--Glenn-Emory Day--and to share in worship and ministry together. I thank you for your support of the Emory Wesley Fellowship and their ministry here in the Glenn/Emory Community. It is an honor and privilege to work with such amazing and gifted students and to offer them a place and space to explore God's call and will in their lives.

*Let us pray:* Healing God,  
Give us all the strength, the humility, and  
the ability to hear your voice today:  
to be transformed and even made whole by  
your powerful Holy Spirit as we sing,  
speak, and do your Word and Will.  
Through the One whom we Follow--Jesus the Christ, Amen.

**Jeremiah the book context/setup**

The Book of Jeremiah is a book about survival--it is yet another story of the survival of God's people. The Book of Jeremiah tries to come to grips with a national and cultural disaster where the people of Judah are being attacked, conquered, deported, enslaved, occupied, shamed, oppressed and generally 'cut off' from God--the source of their life and faith.

Jeremiah, the character, exemplifies what is happening to Judah--he is ***unmarried*** and ***bears no children*** symbolizing the *end of life in the land*. In the Book he gets arrested, imprisoned, fights with false prophets, gets thrown into a muddy cistern, left for dead, and narrowly escapes (but he DOES *escape*). He loses almost everything, but he does survive. And--looking back at it--So too do the people of God.

Jeremiah is often called “the weeping prophet” because it seems like Jeremiah is always ***crying***, *lamenting*, and *generally is unhappy about what is going on*. This is pretty standard for prophets. There are standard things prophets did back then--it is like they had a “PROPHETIC TOOL KIT”--and here we see one scholars call “*symbolic action*”--these actions of the prophet, like crying or anguish here with Jeremiah, were often expressions of the very emotions of the Lord God. The emotions and feelings of the prophet, ESPECIALLY in Jeremiah, express the ***emotions and feelings*** of God.”

Throughout Jeremiah there seems to be a “***symphony***” or ***choir of voices*** going on--it is sometimes difficult to discern who is speaking--Jeremiah or God?! The passage for today is an excellent example of this complicated and confusing style. However, due to the symbolic action clause--we know that the words and emotion they convey are an

expression of God's lament for the hurt and pain that *The People* have caused themselves and others--not to mention *GOD*.

So as we read this passage we hear God's voice--we see a God who has ears to hear the cry of The People--a God who cries with the people--God's joy is gone--grief is upon God--GOD's heart is sick at the destruction, the brokenness, the heartache, the suffering and oppression. God is lamenting WITH the prophet--this is a ***shared lament and a shared pain*** that is truly fully human and fully divine.

Another classic item in the "Prophetic Tool Kit" is the one we see next--"***the Rhetorical Question***." One that is still frequently used by teachers, students, parents, children, and preachers today-- "Is it not?" (pause for laughter)

In Jeremiah we see these questions coming in sets of three and here Jeremiah uses the first set to check the assumptions of The People--asking questions whose answers are assumed as a "YES" by *The People*.

The first two are simple enough: "*Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?*" alluding to the many times that the Lord has swooped in and saved Jerusalem and the Israelites through countless sieges and battles--through the Red Sea--and through other miraculous deeds of power where God alone could get credit for the victory and grace which was given.

But the third question is a different kind--one that turns the other two around: "*Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their foreign idols?*" This is an ***indictment*** of The People for which no one can argue on their behalf-- earlier in the Book, in chapter 7, God Forbids Jeremiah to intercede on behalf of the people and their idolatries. **This is NOT Good.** Not good.

And ***EVERYONE ONE IS AWARE OF IT***. The People know and can feel it--Jeremiah knows and feels it--AND ***God*** knows and feels it--we read "*The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.*"

It is at this low point that the second round of rhetorical questions takes aim at our vulnerable and injured state: "*Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?*"

Here we hear of the famed "Balm of Gilead"--a healing resin made from the sap of a tree grown in the region just east of the Jordan--a region renowned throughout the Mediterranean for its physicians, healers, and the healing salve.

Again, the third question sheds light on the first two--if there is such medicine and healing available to The People--why has their health not been restored? Why is there not redemption for the people? why is there no hope or help in the face of destruction and oppression? ***WHY are the Wounded not being made whole?!***

**(PAUSE)**

### **Balm In Gilead**

In a day and time ***closer to our context***--some 2,500 years after these words were written--a people in the midst of a set of circumstances similar in its level of oppression and calamity produced one of the most familiar and beloved Spirituals: ***"There IS A Balm in Gilead."***

In the midst of the brutality of slavery--being violently removed from their homelands and loved ones and born into the cruel indifference of a world of human usury and possession--***in the MIDST*** of these immensely oppressive circumstances enslaved people were able to answer the ***resounding rhetorical "NO"*** of Jeremiah 8 with this answer: ***"YES"--there IS a balm in Gilead.***

The words of the spiritual boldly proclaim "There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul." (sing?!)

***The verses*** encourage their singers and hearers with exhortations citing Jesus, Peter, Paul, and the Holy Spirit. The ***second verse*** admonishes us to not be discouraged in seeking for knowledge because Jesus, our friend, is always willing to teach. ***Verse three*** ventures into our spiritual gifts reminding us that if we can't "preach like Peter" or "pray like Paul"--that if all else fails we'll "just tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all." In the book ***Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of Spirituals*** psychologist and musician Arthur C. Jones writes that "enslaved Africans [were able] to transform sorrow into joy, to make a way where no way seemed possible." THAT is the very action of God's Holy Spirit in the world--we can point to it and name it as God's Spirit ***making a way where there was no way***. They sang these determined songs of hope in the face of pain and suffering.

Jones goes on to write that ***"That ultimate message of hope and healing...is the product of creative tension between awareness of painful oppressive circumstances and the simultaneous envisioning of a hopeful future."*** He writes that ***"This is not a naive optimism, but rather a genuine inner transformation."***

### **A Time of Reflection**

***And so***, in our own lives, we see that in the ***AWARENESS OF PAIN A VISION OF HOPE*** is necessary for making the wounded whole. Medically speaking you cannot

cure what you cannot diagnose. The Physician cannot heal conditions of which they are not aware.

I think all people are aware of some pain and oppression in their own lives--BUT I am not sure that we are fully aware of what is always causing the pain, depression, and difficulties for us as individuals and communities.

But, the good news is, as this passage in Jeremiah reminds us, God is *literally painfully* aware of what ails us--our God is a God who knows our wounds and suffers with us--God came in human form to earth--Jesus came and lived a human life--fully human, fully divine **AND**, as the the Spiritual reminds us, **he suffered and “died for all.”**

AND, beyond that, is the resurrection--*a future hope*.

There are things in our lives that God uses to give us hope--**touchstones** that remind us of the love God has for us and for all people. For many it is family, friends, community--for others it is music, stillness, exercise, vacations, or old photos. These are things that bring us back from the edge of our own existence--from the brink of our own sadness or the chasm of despair and hopelessness--there are the things that God uses to bring us back into a life of hope.

For me, the most striking verse of *There is a Balm in Gilead* is the first: “**Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.**” (*SING*)

This is the verse that is about **healing**. THIS is a verse about “**making the wounded whole.**” THIS is what God’s Spirit is about: ***making the wounded whole.***

I invite us into a time of reflection--a time to pray and think about what things God uses to bring you back to life--when you are discouraged WHAT **revives your soul again?** At the end of our time of prayer and reflection we will join together in singing “There *IS* a Balm In Gilead.”

Let us be in an attitude of prayer.