

“There Is a Balm”
Jeremiah 8:18-22
Rev. Andrew Connors
Proper 11
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“The ante-bellum Negro preacher was the greatest single factor in determining the spiritual destiny of the slave community,” wrote Howard Thurman in his book, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. “He it was who gave to the masses of his fellows a point of view that became for them a veritable Door of Hope. His ministry was greatly restricted as to movement, function, and opportunities of leadership, but he himself was blessed with one important insight: he was convinced that every human being was a child of God. This belief included the slave as well as the master. When he spoke to his group on an occasional Sabbath day, he knew what they had lived through during the weeks; how their total environment had conspired to din into their minds and spirits the corroding notion that as human beings they were of no significance. Thus his one message springing full grown from the mind of God repeated in many ways a wide range of variations: ‘You are created in God’s image. You are not slaves, you are not “niggers;” you are God’s children.’ Many weary, spiritually and physically exhausted slaves found new strength and power gushing up into all the reaches of their personalities, inspired by the words that fell from this [preacher’s] lips. He had discovered that which religion insists is the ultimate truth about human life and destiny. It is the supreme validation of the human spirit. [Those] who know this [are] able to transcend the vicissitudes of life, however terrifying, and look out on the world with quiet eyes.¹

Today we focus on two hymns that spring from the African-American negro spiritual tradition - There Is A Balm in Gilead and We Shall Overcome. There Is a Balm derives from the Jeremiah text that we read this morning - “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” The Jeremiah tradition grows out of the devastation of Israel’s exile experience in 6th century BCE. It offers reflections on Israel’s decline toward devastation from its heyday during David and Solomon’s reign as the nation found itself stuck between Assyrian to the north, Egypt to the south and eventually a victim of sudden Babylonian expansion. The Jeremiah tradition says the nation’s decline is a direct result of its faithlessness. And faithlessness is defined by public injustice - the way the most vulnerable citizens are exploited by the wealthy and comfortable urban elites. The society, Jeremiah booms, has become literally sick.

¹ Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, first published by Howard Thurman, 1975, reprinted by Friends United Press in Richmond, 1990, p. 11. Howard Thurman explains in the introduction that these reflections were originally written in 1945 and privately held until much later.

Foreign invaders, the prophet explains, are God's way of punishing Israel for its internal faithlessness, its internal injustice.

What's astounding in this book is not just the social justice read, but God's incredible pathos. God is not only angry in Jeremiah, God is deeply wounded. Long before Jesus hangs from the cross, we meet this suffering God, suffering because the people that God loves fail to create the beloved community that God commands.

In the critical part of the text that shapes this God, God is the poet asking the question that goes without answer - Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?² With no response, we are left to conclude that there is no healing in Gilead; that the society is too sick. The cancer of injustice is too far gone. The society has already refused the pathway to its own healing that God had offered through the commands to love God and love neighbor. The decline of this nation is directly connected to its failure to take care of its own people. But the question is more than a rational wondering about whether healing is possible for Israel at this point. It is a revelation of the woundedness of the speaker. It is the cry that most of us have cried at some point in our lives or will cry at some point. Will my experience of hurt, and loss, and betrayal, and pain really have the final word? Is that finally what wins the day?

The question is amazing in and of itself because it's located in the heart of God. Will my experience of hurt, and loss, and betrayal, and pain really have the final word? Is that finally what wins the day? God asks in bitter woundedness. Which makes the hymn and the negro spiritual tradition that produced it all the more astounding because the author answers God's question. "The slave caught the mood of this spiritual dilemma," Howard Thurman wrote, "and did with it an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah's sentence into an exclamation point. There *is* a balm in gilead. Here is a note of creative triumph."³

Consider that for a moment - a prophet in the Bible speaking for God, asks a question about whether healing can be found in a society that has become so sick with injustice. The obvious implied answer to the question is no. It's the answer that you would expect from those who lived under the sick inhumanity of slavery. There is no healing for this society. There is no healing for this nation. There is no healing for these sadistic slave holders. There is no healing for us.

But instead, the one suffering the inhumanity has the chutzpah - *claims the authority* - to answer God's own grief-filled question with an affirmation. There Is a Balm in Gilead. Extraordinary! Extraordinary that such hope for healing could spring from such a place. "The supreme validation of the human spirit," as Howard Thurman called it, springing from God's lips, but reauthorized on the lips of the slave when God

² Although "the poet" is the speaker here, Walter Brueggemann has noted on many occasions that within the prophetic genre the prophet/poet is most often intended to be the voice of God. See Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans), 1998, pp.92-94.

³ Thurman, p. 26.

herself seemed to have lost all hope. Even when God herself seems to have given up on hope, hope springs forth from God's creation from what the world declares to be unlikely places.

Charles Albert Tindley was unlikely to overcome anything in his own life. Born in 1851, the son of a slave, in his first church in Philadelphia, he worked as a janitor for no salary. Never able to attend school, he sought out people to tutor him. He learned Hebrew and Greek with the help of a local synagogue. Though he had no degree, he passed his ordination exams with high scores and after a number of appointments, ended up serving as pastor of the church where he once mopped the floors and cleaned the toilets. He built a multi-racial church in the early part of the 20th century. Let me say that again - he built a multi-racial church in the early 1900s. In 1915, he and a fellow clergy person were attacked by whites with clubs, sticks, and bottles as they marched to protest against the showing of the racist Birth of a Nation film. Tindley wrote a hymn with lyrics that went like this:

This world is one great battlefield
 With forces all arrayed,
 If in my heart I do not yield
 I'll overcome some day.

I'll overcome some day,
 I'll overcome some day,
 If in my heart I do not yield
 I'll overcome some day.

Mine workers reportedly sang the song at the opening of each of their multi-racial meetings in 1909. An African-American choir director, Louise Jarrett Shropshire wrote her own gospel song sometime between 1932 and 1942 with the lyrics:

I'll overcome, I'll overcome
 I'll overcome someday.
 If my Jesus wills, I do believe.
 I'll overcome someday.⁴

⁴ Carl P. Daw, Jr. doubts that "We Shall Overcome" originates with Tindley's hymn due to "the more defiant third line" and the "very different style and musical setting." Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2016, 386-387. But additional sources suggest that Tindley's hymn made it into circulation with the mine workers prior to Shropshire's hymn. For a summary, see "Who Owns 'We Shall Overcome?'" by David A. Graham in *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/04/we-shall-overcome-lawsuit/478068/>.

In 1945, Zilphia Horton, the co-founder of the Highlander Folk School heard Lucille Simmons, a striker, singing a version of the hymn. She began closing every group meeting with this her favorite new song. “We Will Overcome” was printed in 1948, Pete Seeger picked it up, changed the words to “we shall overcome” and added a few versus. He sang it at the Highlander Folk School in 1957 to a gathering that included a young preacher, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. , who remarked to a gathering at his next stop in Kentucky what an impact the song had had on him. It was altered again to the meter that we know today by teenage activists to keep their spirits up during the frightening police raids on Highlander and their subsequent stays in jail in 1959–1960. Dr. King quoted the hymn in his final sermon on his final night in Memphis. But it didn’t die there. They sang it in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. They sang it in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. They translated it into Hindi and Bengali and Malayalam.

So when you sing this song, we stand in solidarity with justice seekers, peace lovers, and patriots of the Kingdom of Heaven some of whom have bended the moral arc of the universe with their blood. We sing in awe of our God, who hears songs sung by teenagers, and mine workers, written by a church janitor, son of a slave, son of the Church; the God who hears, then calls us with this promise.

So the next time you feel like your world has come unglued and there’s no healing to be found. . .the next time you look at what seems like the hopelessness of our political situation, the lack of movement on climate change, the failure to protect the most basic rights of well, anybody other than wealthy white men, the next time you find yourself falling down the abyss of that cynic’s hole, sing a song written by slaves who were far further down that hole that any of you have ever been or are ever likely to be. The next time you wonder if the violence in our city could ever end, if the redlining legacy could ever be reversed, or if your own life could ever find some meaning, peace, or love, sing a song that answered God’s reeling bewildered grief with new life that sprang up even when God was down. Remember the message uttered by the ante-bellum Negro preacher - You are created in God’s image. You are not slaves, you are not “niggers;” you are God’s children like anybody and like everybody else. Words to fire up your hope for action but also give you the peace that you crave in the midst of that struggle. Those who trust these words “are able to transcend the vicissitudes of life, however terrifying, and look out on the world with quiet eyes.”