

Dishonesty and Redemption
Proper 20-C
Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13
The Rev. Anne Dale

“My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... Is there no balm in Gilead?” Through the mouthpiece of the prophet Jeremiah, God himself speaks of His anguish for the people of Judah at a time of their great suffering and disillusionment. In our lesson this morning, God’s words are expressed in the first person, giving us a greater sense of God’s nearness – His intentional presence with His people even when they and we have turned away.

Jeremiah, as are all prophets then and now, is a vessel sent to confront us with our hypocrisy and misuse of God’s blessings, and, in the end, to help us see more clearly the goodness of God who wants only what is best for us.

By the time of Jeremiah, the twelve tribes of Israel had been split into two kingdoms – North and South - for three hundred years or more. The northern kingdom maintained the name of Israel; the southern kingdom, with Jerusalem at its center, became known by the name of Judah - the major tribe of which it was composed.

In the century prior to Jeremiah’s call, Israel had fallen into captivity by the Assyrians. Judah, to the south, had fared to some extent better than Israel; at least they had stood up to the Assyrian assault and maintained some control over their land. But the standoff had cost them economically and politically. Rulers had been forced into perilous political compromises, and we can well imagine that when faced with concessions to the pagan practices of their invaders, religious heritage had been compromised, and the people of Judah had become dishonest stewards of God’s love.

In these years of Jeremiah's active prophesying, the Babylonians were threatening to destroy Judah. For forty years, being despised and rejected throughout, Jeremiah would implore his people to turn from their wicked ways, return to the one God, and be saved from destruction. But, if historians are somewhat accurate on their dates, Jeremiah would live to see the beginnings of the deportation of the people of Judah by foreign rulers. And, in the decades following Jeremiah's call, the whole of Jerusalem along with Solomon's great temple of gold and stone would be destroyed or purloined and her people marched into exile in Babylon – modern day Iraq.

What are we to make of the destruction and God's lament for His chosen people?
*For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt,
I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?*

To paraphrase the words of the Bible commentator R. E. Clements, the message we receive through Jeremiah is that faith is big enough and bold enough to embrace the whole tragic sense of human history. It is a message of faith that sees God as fully involved while recognizing the reality of human freedom – a God who acknowledges the stark and inevitable consequences of human choices and the fact that men and women, in spite of every God-given warning, choose what is evil and spurn what is good. And we, then, must bear the consequences of our human choices, the experiences of pain and suffering.¹

Is there no balm in Gilead? Gilead, an area east of the Jordan River, was known for its commodity of balm, an aromatic resin that was to have brought about healing or, at

¹ R. E. Clements, "Jeremiah," in *Interpretation*, ed. James Luther Mays (Atlanta: John Knox Press) 14-16.

least, masked the smell of festering wounds. There seemed to be no balm as God's words through Jeremiah fell short of convincing the people of Judah to turn from their ways and be healed. There would be no closing of the wounds or easing of the pain. And Jeremiah gleaned no satisfaction from his accurate predictions of doom and gloom.

But the message of hope for redemption did not die. It would be fully manifest 600 years later with the Incarnation – God made flesh through the earthly birth of Jesus Christ.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, we encounter the story of the dishonest manager – a complicated message. It is one I find best not to pick to pieces looking for analogies or allegorical connections. In the story, the rich man brings charges against his manager of squandering his property, demanding an accounting as he sends the manager away. In desperation for his own provision, the manager visits those in debt to his master, slashing their debts by 50% in one case and 20% in another. His purely selfish intent is to assure his esteem among these debtors in hopes that they will reciprocate when he finds himself jobless and homeless as his dishonest business dealings are disclosed. In the end, however, the reduced debts apparently collected to the master's satisfaction, the rich master commends the manager for his shrewdness.

Without picking our way any deeper, we learn that the dishonest manager used with shrewdness the things of this earthly life to ensure the future, and he was redeemed by his master for that shrewdness. We could surmise that the debtors had been overcharged from the start by the manager acting in his own self-interest, and in the end, perhaps fairness prevailed as the poor debtors stood to benefit the most from the manager's "merciful" actions.

Similar incidents are not uncommon in the Bible. The Old Testament describes Abraham, Jacob, Esther, and others using deception in earthly human relationships to ensure their futures. We do not defend dishonesty. Yet, we are called to embrace the whole tragic sense of [earthly] human history and see in it God's one story of continued [heavenly] redemption of His people.

Luke's original Greek uses the word "steward" rather than "manager." So, let us say that, in the tragedy of human history, God redeems us as shrewd stewards of earthly things – He makes all things good. And, as Christians, we are called to see Jesus Christ manifest in all things earthly as well as heavenly.

The past weeks' newscasts have brought haunting reminders of the wasteland left behind by the attacks of 9/11 and ongoing scenes from the bombed-out cities of Ukraine and Gaza. Reflecting on these horrific images, many will ask, "Where is God?" These stark images call us to sense what life would look like without God's redemption through the coming of Jesus Christ – burned-out life without our faithful stewardship of His unconditional love, life without the balm of Gilead.

Where is God? Is God equally present in the mass casualties of war and unthinkable acts of terrorism as in what we would consider "miracles"? The point is this: the God who lamented for the people of Judah is the same God who redeems us in His acknowledgement of the stark and inevitable consequences of our human choices and our poor stewardship of His blessings - the same God who puts the love and courage in the heart of first responders to run into burning towers and toward enemy fire to risk their lives, not for our bank accounts or latest iPhone, but for the safety of unknown strangers whom

they recognize as neighbors – the same God who wants only the best for us, manifest in the promise of everlasting life through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, there *is* a balm in Gilead. We are called to embrace the whole tragic sense of human history and see in it God's one story of redemption of His people through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is one story – all the bad and all the good - from the first light of creation, through exile and redemption, to eternity – the story of the one God who wants only the best for us - God who calls us to be shrewd stewards of earthly things for heavenly purposes – God who makes all things good. Recognizing the reality of our human freedom, our call is to discern that that is heavenly and to be honest stewards of God's redeeming love.

Taking to heart the words of our collect for today:

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Anne Edge Dale
September 21, 2025
St. Philip's Chapel
Christ Church, Elizabeth City