

# If NOTHING is WRONG, THEN *SOMETHING* is WRONG!

Sermon, September 18, 2022

Texts: Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1; I Timothy 2:1-7

We just sang the old spiritual, “There is a Balm in Gilead,” which is partially inspired by the Old Testament lectionary reading. Jeremiah asks, “*Is there no balm in Gilead?*” It has to be somewhat of a rhetorical question, because as the spiritual proclaimed, “There IS a balm in Gilead.” In fact, there was lots of this balm in Gilead! (*In like manner, when the prophet asks “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?”, that, too, can be taken as rhetorical ... if anyone believed God was always present, it would have been the prophet! The problem was that the people were living as if the Lord wasn’t there, as if there were no divine King.*) Gilead was a region of ancient Israel world renowned for this balm, a healing ointment made from the resinous gum of a kind of balsam tree indigenous to the area; it was a well known export of Gilead and is referred to at least four times in Scripture ... Genesis, Ezekiel and twice in Jeremiah. In Genesis 37, after Joseph’s brothers beat him up and threw him into a deep cistern, they sold him to a caravan passing through ... and the merchants in the caravan were traveling from Gilead to Egypt with their camels laden with **balm**, spices and myrrh. (“*Balm of Gilead*” is also mentioned in Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “*The Raven*”; the narrator believes the “*balm in Gilead*” can heal his broken heart, as he is lamenting the death of his love, Lenor.) I read from another source that a mixture of Gilead balm and spices was also used to help preserve the bodies of the dead, it both masked the odor and slowed the process of decay, this is part of the etymology of the English word “*embalm*.” This soothing balm would be applied to effect healing and restoration to health as well as to arrest decay and prevent infection, and there was plenty of it in Gilead.

Another derivation of balm in English is found in the adjective “*balmy*” ... something that was soothing, comforting ... e.g., balmy weather is mild, soothing weather. Sometime in the 1850s, “*balmy*” also came to mean crazy, affected or foolish. Most likely, “*balmy*” in this sense comes from the vague, tuned-out, “*mild*” manner of an afflicted person who may have had too much “*balm*.” People who are “*balmy*” in this sense tend to be quietly loopy, out of it, a bit touched, eccentric, crazy. Well, many in Jeremiah’s time who thought Jeremiah was balmy. Loopy, eccentric, a bit touched, out of step, even crazed. In a slightly similar vein, in the 1990s country singer Steve Vaus was thought by some to be loopy, eccentric, a bit out of step with the times ... but his hit song touched a huge sympathetic chord with many other like-minded people who strongly resonated with the lyrics. The lyrics of his hit song, “*Black and White*,” which I won’t sing for you at this time:

Pull a chair up to the TV set, [and hear] “*Good night David, Good night Chet*”  
Depending on the channel you tuned, you got Rob and Laura or Ward and June.  
It felt so good, felt so right ... Life looked better in black and white.

I Love Lucy, The Real McCoys, Dennis the Menace, the Cleaver boys,  
Rawhide, Gunsmoke, Wagon Train; Superman, Lois Lane,  
Father Knows Best, Patty Duke, Rin Tin Tin and Lassie too,  
Donna Reed on Thursday night ... Life looked better in black and white.

I wanna go back to black and white. Everything always turned out right.  
Simple people, simple lives; good guys always won the fights  
Now nothing is the way it seems, in living color or on the screen.  
I wanna go back to black and white;

In God they trusted, in bed they slept, a promise made was a promise kept  
They never cussed or broke their vows; they’d never make the network now.  
But if I could, I’d rather be in a TV town in ‘63.  
It felt so good, felt so right; life looked better in black and white.

I’d trade all the channels on the satellite if I could just turn back the clock tonight,  
To when everybody knew wrong from right. Life was better in black and white.

Now, some of those lyrics may seem like ancient history to many of you here, but others of us can really resonate. (*I love old reruns of **The Rifleman**, an old black and white series with “simple people, simple lives, and the good guys always won the fights.” My brothers and I never failed to miss that program when we were young.*) And that song was written well over twenty years ago! I’m reminded of another quote from over twenty years ago, one syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell wrote in September 1999: “*When I saw Monica Lewinski listed among the Ten Most Admired Women in America, I knew that I was no longer living in the country I grew up in. Maybe someone as foreign as me should apply for a green card.*” Again, these sentiments were written well over two decades ago. Today, especially of late, there is just so much more gray, so much more confusion about personal morality, so much more political vitriol and rancor and incivility, so much of

our public discourse has coarsened, so much increased blurring of the boundaries between wrong from right today. Now, I am not one to constantly wring my hands and lament, "Ain't it awful?" and focus on all that is going wrong; there is a sermon in itself here that there remains a lot of good in our world in general and in our nation in particular that should be celebrated, proclaimed, encouraged, promoted, fostered. In a fallen world there will always be something wrong with everything. But constant harping and complaining only about what's wrong, along with increasingly criticizing and belittling those in positions of leadership, seems to be more common today, even among Christians. In our Timothy reading, Paul reminds us because Christ died so that all may be saved, we should pray for all, including our leaders. This is another sermon in itself, but rather than complain, we should accept God's providence and seek to please Him in our prayers and conversations and actions and thus seek to make things better, not bitter. However, as in these inflationary times we are rightly concerned about a huge and growing financial deficit, many of us are also gravely concerned about a huge and exponentially growing *decency* deficit.

T.S. Eliot's play "The Cocktail Party," written in 1948 was probably the most popular of the playwright's seven plays he wrote. One of the main characters is a woman by the name of Celia. An accomplished woman, Celia is searching after some happiness and meaning in her life, and she has made her way through the round of entertainment, theatre, receptions, cocktail parties and other activities that London had to offer. She seems to have it all, yet she is tired of it all. She is profoundly aware something is missing. Finally, Celia goes to see a psychiatrist. After months of weekly sessions in which she pours out her heart, the psychiatrist finally tells Celia he can find nothing wrong. Celia's response? She laments, *"If nothing is wrong, then something is very wrong!"*

Just as a bit of an aside, how many of you have experienced that level of frustration in a doctor's office? You go to the doctor with various symptoms, and after running all sorts of tests ... blood tests, CT scans, EKGs, MRIs, EEGs, ABCDEFGs ... he tells you, "Nothing is wrong." You don't know whether to hug him out of relief or wring his neck out of frustration because something IS wrong, something is not right in your body, that's why you're there in the first place. The full quotation of Celia: *"I should really like to think there's something wrong with me. Because, if there isn't, then there's something wrong, Or at least, very different from what it seemed to be, with the world itself — and that's much more frightening! So I'd rather believe something is wrong with me that could be put right."* That, by the way, was believed to be T.S. Eliot's commentary on life in general. If nothing is wrong, if this is the way it just is, then something is really wrong!

In short, Jeremiah was trying to get his people to see something was wrong. Apparently those around him thought nothing was wrong; again, they thought he was the balmy one. Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet. Jeremiah's career spanned nearly five decades. We looked at this last February, but the bird's eye view of the 52 chapters of the book of Jeremiah is that for five decades he could see how his people were living a "new normal," they were abandoning their historical godly traditions and faith practices, and with a prophet's eye he could clearly see the day of reckoning coming (*in the form of the invading Babylonians*). Throughout it all, Jeremiah did what he could to stand up and speak out, hoping that some would hear, that some would take action and do something to change their ways before it was too late. He not only saw judgment coming, he tragically would go on to live through it himself, as he was there when the Babylonians came and conquered.

All along he could see how his people were saying "No, God!" They were abandoning God, abandoning biblical tradition, abandoning morality and decency, and by God's Spirit the prophet could see clear as day what that all meant and where it was all heading and where it all would end up. Again, throughout it all, Jeremiah stood up and spoke out. The people would not listen to Jeremiah, many of his own townspeople, even some of his kin, opposed him and tried to shut him up. As we read last week in Jeremiah 4, God says: *"My people are fools; they do not know Me. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."* These people had gotten so used to doing evil that they no longer knew what was good; this was their new normal ... "Nothing is wrong!" Jeremiah asks, rather rhetorically, *"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?"*

*Is there no balm in Gilead?* Of course there is; that's like asking today, *"Are there no doctors in Boston?"* As mentioned, Gilead was world renowned in that day as a producer and exporter of balm! But people who are sick need to avail themselves of the provider of that balm, and people won't go to the doctor if they think nothing is wrong. And people won't go to the divine Physician for the same reason, so there is no healing for the wound of Jeremiah's people. The balm in Gilead, by the way, is also a prophetic image of the Messiah ... as healing balm was exported from this region of Israel, so One Who will come out of Israel to bring healing to the nations. In this historical context, though, the people are being warned by Jeremiah that something is very wrong, and they need to repent and come to the divine Physician to heal their sin sick souls and take action to set things right, while they still had time. But they refused, and judgment came ... in the form of the invading Babylonians.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Of course there is. Through Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician is still present as a healing, soothing, restoring presence Who can arrest decay and corruption and give new life. And He is awaiting that moment when we recognize just how wrong things are, repent, and decide to take action to set things right in the time that we have.