FIFTH SUNDAY OF EPIPANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

February 7, 2021

*“A Balm in Gilead”*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

It’s a wonderful song. It is one of those that are wonderful to sing. A balm in Gilead—this is what I thought of as I was reading through the passages for this morning. Both pieces spoke to the very first people (who heard them) of the tremendous power, comfort, and rest there is to be had when we are in relationship with God. Also, both speak to the very real experience of being detached from all that is meaningful and life-giving—which is to say: feelings of being separated from our own capacity to live in the world with strength and courage, feelings of being separated from God, feelings of despair.

In the first passage we heard, from the prophet Isaiah, the first people who heard it were the Israelites who were languishing in Babylonian captivity.

These are the people who had seen their homeland fall into the hands of an enemy intent on stripping them of everything they held dear and true: their homes and lands, their national identity, even their dignity. Indeed, their enemies had destroyed all they have known. One writer described their plight in this way: [Imagine that…] y*ou and other survivors of your people are in exile…hundreds of miles away from home.* [Everything] *is in ruins,* [everything is] *destroyed and wild animals roam the streets. Many family members and friends are dead or missing.*

Think of how you would you feel if this was happening to you. What would you do?

What would you think had happened to God?

Now think of the many people around the world to whom this very thing has happened and is happening—the Rohinga in Myanmar, many of the Syrians who were made refugees, the Palestinians, and so many, many others.

In our own national history, many years ago—although not as many years ago as we sometimes think—as African American slaves listened to stories like this of the Hebrew people, they heard in these stories their own story of loss, suffering, and slavery, and as they did, they began to sing these words:

*There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole.*

*There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.*

Imagine that: even while in the depths of pain and profound suffering, the African American slaves in our country reached out for hope. Living in a time and place where their very soul has been attacked, beaten-down, and held against its will, far from all that was familiar, restful, or even safe. Still, they reached out to God.

In so doing, they acknowledged the very real danger of despair, but through faith, the African American slaves believed that there *was* a balm to be had; there *was* hope to hang-on to.

This is what Isaiah was addressing with the Hebrew people in Babylon. He was acknowledging what they were feeling. They were despairing—feeling as though they had been wrenched away from everything good and life-giving—even away from all that was sacred, even away from God.

As I said before: these feelings are not unknown to us, too. Of course, we are fortunate because our lives are not nearly so tragically affected. However, that does not diminish the feelings we are having in our own context. This does not mean that we should ignore our own situation, our own lives.

In fact, what I would us to acknowledge is that such feelings are not unusual, and are always a danger, because time and life passes us so quickly that sometimes it is difficult to stop and catch our breath. Sometimes, we get so preoccupied with what is in front of us that we forget to look and see what is all around us. Sometimes, the present moment will have us in such a tight grip that we loose our way in that moment.

So before we know it, we begin to lose our grip on hope, and even worse: we begin to lose our grip on the source of that hope. And so, I believe we should take these feelings seriously, and be aware of whether or not we are having them.

I say this as I think of the many ways in which despair is often expressed.

One of them is anger—despair turned outward to the people around us. Anger is often expressed as acts of violence. People who feel there is no other recourse than aggressive behavior, they find a target and act out. We continue to see this so much in our life—all around us—people who feel cut-off from all that is familiar and safe who take matters into their own hands, violently.

Anger is one way we may deal with despair and it is not only destructive, it can also be self-destructive. So, violence is never a good response to our suffering, if for only because we know that the destruction violence brings is often not reversible, we are not always able to make amends for the trust and lives that are often lost through violence.

Isaiah seems to know this, and he also knows something about God that he wants all of his readers to know, too. Isaiah knows a God who stands ever-ready to bring courage and strength into all of our feelings of powerlessness and despair.

To such feelings, Isaiah writes:

*28Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
   the Creator of the ends of the earth...
29*[God] *gives power to the faint,
   and strengthens the powerless.*

Indeed, ours is a God who does not wait for us to make the first move, but who reaches out and invites us into relationship so that we need never *feel* alone—never be alone—so that we may never loose hope. This is the God Isaiah knows and encourages us to see and experience: God as the powerful creator of all things—God is the giver of life.

What is more, Isaiah tells us, our God is steadfast and faithful to all who will receive God into their lives, even—and *especially*—into our suffering.

We are beloved. We are God’s own—and so God will not leave us to languish in suffering and despair. What God wants is for each of us, and all of us together, to live our lives fully—participating in life in a way that is wholesome and life-giving; ways that make use of our gifts, and our capacity for compassion and generosity.

This is why I wanted us to also hear the story of Simon-Peter’s mother -in-law in the Gospel of Mark.

As I said last week, Mark tells his story of Jesus in a brisk, no nonsense way. In the previous twenty verses, Mark has taken us from baptism to the calling of the disciples, to Jesus’ first public act of ministry—preaching and healing—and now to this story where Simon and Andrew have brought him to their home for a meal.

As we heard, Simon’s mother-in-law was not well. When Jesus hears this, he immediately raises her up. Her response is what I hope all of us notice and remember about her: That once returned to health and wholeness, Simon’s mother-in-law immediately begins to bustle about the home getting things ready, making things happen.

The Bible says, “she began to serve them,” but I think its more than just serving them. It’s more than fulfilling the *obligation* of hospitality.

What I hope we see and experience is how being touched by healing—that after receiving the much needed balm of God’s healing love—Simon Peter’s mother-in-law *responded* with hospitality, with all of the relaxing gifts of food, and the warmth and comfort of her home. Her capacity for offering this kind of environment was what was returned to her—her capacity for gratitude is at the heart of that very brief but important story. Indeed, what Simon’s mother-in-law received was *her* capacity to *be* the balm for their weariness and desire for rest and renewal.

This, I believe, is the point to both of these stories: that God wants to lift us up to strength so that we can *be* help and strength for others; so that we will have the breadth of vision to see who among us are in need of the balm of compassion, strength, and justice—so that all of God’s beloved people are remembered and not left behind.

I know that last year was a rough year, and this one got off to a rocky start. The truth, as I hope we are all aware, is that it is going to take some time—we are going to have to be patient for a while longer—and that we are all going to have to work very hard *together* to get our lives back on track.

That is why my prayer for us is that we let ourselves believe and even *revel* in the good news that through God there *is* a balm in Gilead—there is hope, there is courage, there is strength—*renewed* strength to give us all a second wind, so that we may *“mount up with wings like eagles,* [to] *run and not be weary,* [to] *walk and not faint.”*

There is the hand of Christ, waiting for us to put our hand in to his so that we, too, may receive the balm of healing, and be raised-up to renewed hope, vitality, and life—so that *we* may also become the balm that brings hope and God’s love to the world God so loves.

This is my prayer. I pray that it is your prayer, too. Amen.