Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
September 21, 2025
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A prophet, a theologian, and an archbishop walk into a bar. It's not the set-up for a joke; it's the set-up for this sermon. Imagine, if you will, Jeremiah - known as the weeping prophet, weeping at the destruction of Jerusalem and much of what the Jewish world held dear, Howard Thurman - a brilliant, African-American philosopher, some say mystic, and civil rights leader of the twentieth century, and Rowan Williams - former Archbishop of Canterbury of this century, prolific writer, and poet; imagine listening in on a conversation among these figures wrestling with the question, "Is there no balm in Gilead?"

It's Jeremiah's question, and it cries out from its place in scripture because his times demand it: joy is gone, he is heartbroken, the people are demoralized, their leaders are corrupt, there is a pervasive sense of spiritual bankruptcy. And the question also lands into a scripture rife with other hard, honest, searching questions: am I my brother's keeper, who do you say that I am, whom shall I send, who is my neighbor? Is there no balm in Gilead? So, let's get out in front of the idea that asking questions is a sign of faithlessness; on the contrary, asking questions is the very work of faith. And so, Jeremiah woefully cries, "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Balm. I thought there would be something to soothe, I thought there were physicians, healers, here. I thought that by the time summer had ended, we would be saved.

Like so many other questions scattered throughout scripture, there is no quick response. The question hangs in the air for much of Jeremiah's time, for much of his long book. But like so many other questions, an answer of sorts does echo back, out of other unexpected stories and places and times. Something like twenty-five centuries roll by between Jeremiah's wail and the nineteenth-century spiritual, "There is a balm in Gilead." I wish you could hear the actual voice of Howard Thurman joining the conversation. He recorded a radio address in 1958 about this hymn. He says, "The early singers," (now note, the early singers were enslaved persons, composing this song in captivity), "the early singers did a rather extraordinary thing with this song. What is a question in the book of Jeremiah becomes an exclamation point and word and a note …of triumph. They said, 'There *is* a balm in Gilead.'" Thurman goes on, "This is a very interesting and significant interpretation of the meaning of optimism in a world in which the relentless pressures of life, by which [those] individuals were surrounded, would indicate that pessimism is the only rational answer to the human predicament." It is 'interesting' to him that the singers chose optimism when pessimism seems the only rational answer, given the world that surrounded them. Yes, interesting, indeed.

It's fashionable these days to parse the difference between optimism and hope. But taking Thurman's word (and shaking off our tendency to be precious about semantics), what is this optimism? Optimism, he says, is "distilled out of the raw materials of pessimism." That is: optimism, or hope, does not deny or ignore the realities, the "relentless pressures," the woundedness of the world. It must, it must absolutely see the raw materials for what they are, and still absolutely see more than only woundedness, imagine more than destruction.

And here, our friend Rowan Williams, who has been listening carefully all along, leans in to say yes, yes, there's always more. "You think you have reason for not believing? I can show even better reasons for not believing…" The archbishop continues, "I'm not going to pretend it's simpler than it is…I'm not going to pretend to give you an answer. I'm going to give you the fact that love is possible in the middle of all this. The moment of reconciliation, of love, of forgiveness, of acceptance is [also] as real as all the nightmares…"

And so, as I continue to take liberties with these gentlemen and with the time-space continuum, Thurman nods, yes, exactly, there's always more. We either believe, he thought, that "life is fixed, is finished, is completed, is unyielding. Or that life is unfinished. Life is dynamic. Life is growing, Life is open-end." And here he gets on a roll, keep listening:

"Now, if a man's position is that life is fixed and finished, then deep within himself …he is sure that in the last analysis, there isn't anything that any man can do about anything. Life is readymade. It is frozen…He is the prisoner of the event, the prisoner of the circumstance. Now this robs life of all alternatives and options.

"If, however, his position is that life is dynamic, is open-end, then one of its most persistent characteristics is a … sense of options and alternatives. This means … that whatever may confront a man at any particular moment-- whatever may be his predicament -- he always has a sense of alternative … so that he can bring to bear-- upon the gritty facts of his experience-- a live option which may alter the circumstance… which may give to him a sense of meaning and significance that spills over-- goes beyond the event by which he may be temporarily caught…There is always available to the individual, some additional resource-- some additional insight, some additional strength-- that goes beyond whatever he may be experiencing at a particular moment."

Is this not the very stuff of faith? Believing in what we cannot quite glimpse. That there is something beyond the present predicament, something more? That amid the gritty facts of our experience, we believe in an alternative way, in possibility. The person in a frozen, unyielding story doesn't even look up to wonder about that mysterious balm; they've caved to apathy. In a dynamic, faithful life, we hold on to the possibility of more. After all, if we could see it, touch it, it wouldn't be *faith.* Faithfulness is wondering aloud about that 'more-ness,' precisely when we aren't sure at all, when we are most heart-sick, when corruption and moral bankruptcy flood the field. We are being faithful when we allow our hearts to break and when we keep asking the hard questions, seeking and insisting upon that promised healing. We are being faithful when we notice goodness and strength in ourselves and in others, when we don't let joy slip away from us. When we choose optimism, though pessimism seems the only rational answer. Faithfulness is insisting that the cure is still real, even when we can't seem to get our hands on that soothing balm. Especially when we can't find it, when we insist that it is still true, that there is a balm in Gilead, we are making a bold and audacious proclamation: Proclaiming that all the while there is still beauty and kindness, that repair is just as real as destruction.

Some days, the most faithful, simplest, hardest action we can take is to take a good, hard look around our world, not denying all that confronts us, the predicament and circumstances, and declare that reconciliation and love are also very real. The faithful, simple, hard thing we must do is to keep looking for healing. Believing against the relentless pressures that there are alternatives, reasons even still for optimism and hope, that, yes, there is a balm in Gilead.