

“Is there no Balm in Gilead?” Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13; 9/23/07; AUMC

There was a terrible drought. No rain, no water, not even a drop of it. That means, in ancient Israel, no crops; no foods. Today’s Jeremiah text says in verse 20: “The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” People are crying and starving; they are left hopeless.

In truth, the drought is a symbol of what the nation of Israel was facing. It was 588BC, just one miserable year before the final collapse of Jerusalem. The Babylonian armies were at the gate of the city. But the prophet Jeremiah was in the dark room of the king Zedekiah’s dungeon. He was locked up there because he had preached about God’s imminent judgment.

As a preacher, Jeremiah did not mind telling the truth; nothing but the truth. “Thus says the Lord” was Jeremiah’s repeated phrase in his sermons when the people proceeded from one evil to another; they did not know God. “Thus says the Lord,” Jeremiah proclaimed. “I am giving this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he will take it.”

Still, no one listened. They thought he was crazy. But even in the dark room of the prison cell, the prophet could not stop crying:

My joy is gone, my heart is broken. “Where is God” they ask. “Is God NOT in Zion?” “Is there no balm in Gilead?” “Is there no hope in Israel?”

Picture the image. What would you do if you were in Jeremiah’s position?

You speak out and tell the truth. But no one in the nation seems to care about it! And yet you know the nation is almost at the hands of the enemies. It’s a frustration; it’s a greatest despair you can have.

Let’s see what we have in the Gospel text too. If there is a text that preachers want to get around, this is one of the texts. I have been preaching from the lectionary more than ten years, every time I face this text, I also stayed away. But this time, I wanted to break it through.

If I paraphrase it, the story goes like this: A rich man had this real estate business. But he was not there all the time and put a manager in charge of

everything. One day, there was a rumor that the manager would be fired because there was a problem. We don't know if it was the manager or the owner. The manager was very troubled. He had a family to feed but didn't have other jobs available. He didn't know how to dig ditches; he did not want to sit on the street begging. He was in big trouble.

And this is what this man did. He called his customers in and asked them how much they owed to the company. One person came in and said, "My debt is 850 gallons of olive oil." "Yes, here is the contract you signed." The manager answers: "Ok, everything looks good. But here is a new contract for you. Now you only owe us half that amount." And another person came in and said "I owe you 1,000 bushels of wheat." And the manager gave him a 20 per cent discount.

What was he doing? It was not even his money, how can he do such a thing! It was totally wrong. It was a fraud.

The trouble is, however, the owner not only said "Yes" to this. He also commanded this rascal's act. Isn't this weird? What's wrong with this text?

No wonder preachers try to avoid this text! It does not make any sense at all! How should I preaching on this?

Justin Ukpong is a New Testament scholar in West Africa and writes an article on this notorious text. And this is what I found from his article (Parable of Shrewd Manager, *Semeia*, 73 (1996), 189-208). He says:

the reason why we have trouble with this text is that when we hear the story we automatically think that the rich man, the owner, represents God and the manager's act is unjust. But what if the owner was a greedy man who made lots of profits illegally from the poor innocent people?

Ukpong says, in ancient Israel like now in many parts of the world including West Africa, usury (lending money for interest) was illegal. If we read the Bible, the Jewish laws prohibite lending people money with interest. You can do that to foreigners but not to your own people. For instance, Exodus 22:25 say, "If you lend money to a needy fellow-Hebrew, you don't take interest."

But some people knew how to get around these laws. This is how they did: Today one customer came to the manager and said “I owe you 850 gallons of olive oil. Here is the contract.” But the problem was, out of this total amount 850, it does not say how much was the principal and how much was the interest.

But what happened was, the poor people may have just borrowed 425, only one half the amount, to meet the basic needs of their family. And the annual interest was 100%. When the harvest season comes they would have to pay 850. That was outrageous! It was not something the manager created; he only followed the rule his owner made.

Well, that was how the rich owner not only became richer but they exploited the poor people: It was a total corruption and injustice in the economic structure. The worse thing happened when the harvest was no good and the poor farmers could not pay back their debts. They eventually became slaves. In a system like this, there was no way out for the poor people.

That is what happened in Jesus’ time in Israel. And it happens now in many parts of the world, Ukpong says.

The rich become richer; the poor become poorer.

So the same question comes to many people’s minds, “Where is justice?” “Where is God?” “What is God doing in the midst of all these oppression and exploitation?” “Is there any cure for this corruption?” “Is there any balm in Gilead?”

In the story, upon hearing the rumor that he may lose his job soon, the manager moved fast. The clock was ticking. He could not wait for long. He took an action; he even risked his credit. Before it became too late, he had to do something. Instead of letting the way it had been, he wanted to make a difference; instead of following the order of his owner he wanted to follow the words of God. So he called people in and gave them break in their debts. But what he gave them was not just debt reduction, he was doing a justice to the economic system that had been wrong; he was giving the people a freedom; he was giving them a new life.

Can you imagine how they may have been surprised to hear that their debt was cut into half or 80 per cent? That is good news. You would feel like you came to a different world. I wish we all could have this kind of good surprise in our lives.

Wow!!! That's really good news!

But even better and greater news is this: the text says, the owner commanded the manager for what he did. That means, this rich man also realized that what he had done to those people was wrong. A repentance happened. For the first time in his life, I am sure, he must have felt happy when he saw other people happy.

“Is there No God in Israel?” “Is there no Balm in Gilead?” These were the rhetorical questions Jeremiah asked when he couldn't see any hope on the brink of the nation's fall.

Some 600 years later, Jesus also saw the same alienation and despairs in people's lives. Here 2000 years later, the question is still the same to many of us:

Is there hope? Can there be justice? Is there balm in Gilead?

What if the people of Israel had listened to what God had to say! Their history would have been different! When one person does what is just and right, it is not just that person who feels happy. The whole world can feel it together! Miracle happens and change is possible!

This is what I believe: “Yes, surely there is balm in Gilead. There is hope.

When we prick up our ears to God's urgent words and take an action risking our lives to do what is right, you and I will not only be commanded by God.

We will also feel the rich flavor of the balm in Gilead. One person's response to God's urgent words makes the whole world different.

Amen.