

IS THERE A BALM IN GILEAD?

I'm curious: have you ever felt 'boxed-in'? You know: feeling like there's no exit, no healing, no hope? Last May, I did. Accidentally our grandson was burned over 10% of his body. The details aren't important; what's important is knowing our family went into a deep valley. It was if we were suspended in an emotional grief-bubble, as the rest of the world whizzed by, apparently clueless to our plight. I ricocheted from one feeling to another. But a reoccurring question kept surfacing: 'where's God'? Or in line with our morning theme: is there a balm in Gilead?

Ever asked that question? Most have. Could have been in the middle of a divorce – could have been as you exited a job involuntarily -- or it could be -- right now -- during COVID-19. Where is God in this crazy crisis? How much longer, Lord? Is there a balm in Gilead?

The question is there a balm in Gilead is biblical. **[1]** For starters, Gilead was an actual Bible town, located in a mountainous region east of the Jordan River, known for being a repository of a healing resin sourced from balsam trees. Gilead and its balm are mentioned three times in scripture, most memorably in Jeremiah 8:22 as Jeremiah not only names Gilead's healing character, but asks: is it adequate – is there a balm in Gilead (Jeremiah 8:22) -- especially in light of the harm done to the Israelites by the Babylonians. Well, if Gilead's balm is adequate "...why...has the health of my poor people not been restored?..." (Jeremiah 8:22). Indeed, Jeremiah infers that the literal balm from Gilead is not adequate -- but good news -- a balm also wells-up from God -- and it *is* adequate. (Jeremiah 30:17 and 33:6).

What a good reminder for us amid our suffering. Yes, conventional remedies are needed during painful seasons but they are not adequate. Only God is adequate, the ultimate balm in Gilead – able -- in the words of the famed African American spiritual to make the wounded whole. I long for such wholeness during my seasons of waiting and wondering -- my 'long dark nights of the soul.' But practically, biblically, how do you navigate periods of pause and pain?

[2] *Navigation Prompt #1 – Confess: Suffering 'Stinks.'* Persons of faith tend to sweeten the jolting reality of life. But God loves honesty. And so just say it: seeing a loved one burned, or experiencing a pandemic is upsetting, disrupting life in a terrifying way. The Biblical character Job models such bluntness: "...What's the point of life when it doesn't make sense... Instead of bread, I get groans for my supper, then leave the table and vomit my anguish. The worst of my fears have come true...My peace destroyed. No rest for me, ever—death has invaded life." (Job 3:23-26, *The Message*).

[3] *Navigational Prompt #2 – Look For Manna.* Remember manna; it was the nourishment God gave the Israelites in the wilderness of their suffering and abandonment. But it didn't arrive in one delivery; instead, God provided overtime, just enough manna for each day. "...Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day...I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight, you will eat meat, and in the morning, you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God..." (Exodus 16:4,12). Did you 'catch' both God's attentiveness and God's timing? God hears our grumbling, and God is responsive, but according to God's preferred provision and schedule. And so be patient, but affirm: God will provide.

Of all the spiritual disciplines, patience, waiting, is one of the most difficult. But it is especially

relevant during Lent as we focus on the passion of our Lord, for passion in Greek is the same word as patience. Nevertheless: [4] “To be handed over [to a season of waiting] ...is...disquieting to a person who, by habit or temperament, has been exceptionally active and energetic or a notable achiever” W.H Vanstone observes. “[But] such [a] person may well find comfort in the thought that a similar pattern appears in the life of Jesus [during Holy Week] that He also passed from activity and work and achievement...into a...phase of waiting and dependence and passion...”ⁱ as, in essence, Jesus became a patient of God during His darkest days.

In our darkest days -- seasons of suffering -- we also become patients of God, in God's waiting room. But be assured God is active and therapeutic, nevertheless. And so, look for God, look for manna even in periods of pause and pain. For example, in our current suffering: look for neighbors running errands for neighbors -- look for grocery stores restocking shelves and extending hours -- look for physicians adding services and sharpening attentiveness. For in a myriad of ways, even in the wilderness, even in the waiting room, God is delivering. For [5] "...Where shall I...flee from your presence... [O Lord]. If I make my bed in Sheol [Hell], you are there! If I...dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me...If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you [O God]; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. (Psalm 139: 7-12).

[6] *Navigational Prompt #3 -- Expect New Creation.* Scripture is filled with hopelessness, wasteland, and desert. But consistently, scripture accents God's promise to make a way where there appears to be no way; "...a road in the wilderness and paths in the wastelands.” (Isaiah 43:19, NET) – new creation! Over Christmas, my wife Robin and I visited the 911 Memorial in New York City. One of the remarkable aspects of the Memorial is a [7] Callery pear tree, known as the Survivor Tree. Buried under the rubble of 9/11, the Survivor Tree had little hope for survival, a tragic jumble of snapped roots and scorched branches. But New York City Parks and Recreation Workers were relentless, taking the tree and nursing it back to health, over time; a long time. But now the Survivor Tree stands proud and secure, as new smooth limbs extend from old gnarled, charred stumps, an unmistakable symbol of resilience and rebirth. But there's more: each year the 9/11 Memorial identifies three communities in the U.S. that also have suffered a tragedy, and provides those communities with seedlings from the Survivor Tree as a living reminder that over time: blessing can emerge from brokenness, hope can emerge from horror, promise can emerge from pain!

Through God in Christ, blessing can emerge from brokenness, hope can emerge from horror, promise can emerge from pain. For Jesus is the ultimate Survivor demonstrating through the [8] Cross, the Christ-Tree, that even the greatest tragedy, abandonment, suffering can result in redemption and new creation.

Look to Jesus and know new creation; wherever you feel charred and hopeless, receive a seedling from the Christ-Tree and be renewed. For “surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” [but] even the darkness is not dark to you [O God]; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. (Psalm 139: 7-12).

Over time this promise is coming true in our grandson's life; he's healing progressively. But boy, has it been a process! And it will be a process for us as well -- especially during this pandemic --

requiring waiting and patience. But over time God is faithful. **[9]** For overtime, God [does make] a road in the wilderness and a path in the wasteland (Isaiah 43:19). For there *is* a balm in Gilead, in God -- and our God, our Healing God -- will make the wounded whole.

ⁱ W.H. Vanstone, *The Stature Of Waiting* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2006) 34-35; 70.