Is There No Balm in Gilead?
Jeremiah 8:18-22

I. Is There No Balm in Gilead?
I have a confession: I sometimes watch America's Got Talent, and I remember from a previous season a 77 year old man coming onstage to rap. At first, it was bad, but as he barked out lyrics about things in life over which we have no control, his refrain was: Whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do? Soon the whole audience was singing along. Why? Because we can relate: you lose your best friend, the lab report wasn't good; global politics is frightening; costs go up but income doesn't; your spouse is in the hospital - we find ourselves caught in battles we didn't start and we don't know how to finish. Whatcha gonna do?

Jeremiah found himself in the midst of a hard battle for the healing and restoration of God's people. Wild marauders were sweeping down from the north; the country was being torn apart both politically and spiritually. When invited to listen to the Lord, they chose to follow foreign idols. So Jeremiah cried: Is there no balm in Gilead?

Gilead was a region known for its medicinal herbs and salves sought after by physicians. So Jeremiah wondered: whatcha gonna do when there is no relief for the grief, you feel helpless, and no one to soothe your wounds? Remember a time when you wondered if the Lord was there? Is the Lord not in Zion? Is the King not in her? But even as we ask the questions we knows the answer...

I gained a deeper appreciation for this when I heard a black Episcopalian priest preach on this. He asked us to imagine the slaves in the cotton fields, fingers bleeding from picking cotton balls and backs blistering under the southern sun. No physician was going to rush to their aid with soothing salve for their wounds.

The harvest would pass, the summer would end, and still they were not saved. But on one particular Sunday, sitting in the slave balcony listening to the white pastor's message, they heard the prophet's question echoing across the eons: Is there no balm in Gilead? - And an amazing thing happened. A slave started to sing: There is a balm in Gilead... Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain, But then the Holy Spirit Revives my soul again.

II. There Is A Balm in Gilead!
This is the answer to Jeremiah's rhetorical questions. This is the comfort every believer needs in life's darkest hour, as the song says. John's gospel called the Holy Spirit the Paraclete, meaning Counselor, Helper, Guide, and Comforter - all of them true in the church's experience of our Great Physician, Jesus Christ.

You ever hear or read something several times in a week as if the Spirit is guiding you to it? This week it is a quote: Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.
It got me thinking about hard battles. We’ve all known on some level the dismay of the prophet and the discouragement of the slave - times when it was tempting to give in and give up, as if there were no balm and no physician who could heal us. So, whatcha gonna do?

Let the tears flow, said a 4th century monk. Let us confess our sins, turn away from evil and invoke the goodness and mercy of the great Physician - because there is a balm in Gilead!

How many times have you heard your fellow church members say, after passing through one of those darkest hours, that they didn't know how they could have gotten through it without faith and a church that showed healing kindness? The slave was right: there is a balm in Gilead!

So we need to stop apologizing for a church some claim is dull and irrelevant while they turn to the idols of current opinion and personality! We are what Henri Nouwen called Wounded Healers, confessing our faults through tears only to find the Spirit reviving the soul again; learning from hard battles so that we might know a kinder way.

I found in the archives at Columbia Seminary a session record following Sherman’s march. After their town had been burned to the ground, two black men fled to a nearby town hoping to find help and comfort. They approached the session of the Presbyterian Church requesting membership - and to everyone’s surprise, it was granted. It was scandalous in the eyes of many, but we are the church, they replied. What else would we do? Through them, those men experienced the truth: There is a balm in Gilead, and there is a physician there. His name is Jesus.

The church I need and our world needs is the Church called to be the Great Physician’s assistant, His hands and feet, as we counsel, help, guide and comfort one another; a place of welcome where wounds are made whole. We know it's true because we have experienced the Spirit of the Lord here reviving souls in the midst of Grace Presbyterian Church. So, in life's darkest hour, whatcha gonna do? Believe the good news and join with God’s people who know the truth of the slave’s song: There is a balm in Gilead!