

A Balm in Gilead
Matthew 4:1-11
July 30, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.

Such a beautiful song! It refers to the eighth chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, where the prophet is weeping over the spiritual condition of Israel. Jeremiah asks, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician here? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?” Jeremiah is lamenting, despairing. But this song answers, “Oh yes, there is a balm in Gilead. No matter what desert you are wandering in, no matter if you are out in the wilderness in your life, God can heal whatever is causing your pain.” Oh, yes, there is a balm in Gilead!

Our scripture today is about Jesus’ forty days of temptation and testing in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. As Matthew tells the story, Jesus has been out in the desert, fasting for forty days, and the devil comes to him to test him. “Worship me,” the devil says, “and you can have everything. Food. Religious power. Political power. Great wealth. You can have it all ... just worship me.” From somewhere, even after forty days of wilderness trial and no food, Jesus finds the spiritual strength to resist these temptations, to pass the test. He resists the thought of food for his starving body. He resists the offer of religious power. He resists the offer to have all the kingdoms on earth. The devil finally gives up and leaves Jesus alone. And then, right at the end of this passage, a little statement that we often overlook, but that means so much: Suddenly angels came and waited on Jesus.

Angels came and waited on Jesus in his time of trial. The angels waited on him. They served him. They ministered to him. The original verb in this sentence is related to the word deacon – to serve, to minister. Jesus was out in the desert, exhausted, hungry, and some angel deacons showed up with a loaf of fresh bread and some soup. They sat with him for a while and heard his story. They gave him what he needed in that moment. God sent angels into the wilderness. Oh, yes, there is a balm in Gilead when we are in a time of trial. God sends angels.

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I want to tell you a story this morning that I have told before, but I am going to tell it from a little different point of view this time. It’s about a very, very difficult time in my life. I want to you see if you can spot all the angels God sent to help me. I want to be clear that story happened more than a decade before I even met Dave, so this story is not about him.

When I was about 34 ... so, a VERY long time ago ... My first husband and I lived in Texas, where I grew up. We had 2 little boys, one of whom was still an infant, still nursing. I had a part-time job, and my husband worked full-time at an independent bookstore that was also a Western Union agency. Now, you need to know that bookstores don’t make any money. But Western Union agencies bring in a lot of cash. And one year, my husband was robbed in the store at gun point. Twice. He was not hurt physically, but having guns pointed at him sent him into a terrible, spiraling depression. Then, also because of the robberies, the store was sold, and my husband lost his job.

He did not have the emotional balance or confidence even to apply for work at that point, so I got a full-time temporary job. Still, we were sinking financially, and I had these two little boys and a very ill husband to take care of. We decided that he needed a fresh start in the place he was raised, the place we had lived when we first married, Mississippi.

Here is where the angels start to appear. We called Roberta, a friend from our old church in Mississippi, to tell her we were thinking of moving back. Roberta was thrilled. She called another member of the church, someone we barely knew – Gail – who had recently gone through a divorce and was living in a huge old house and renting out rooms to international students. Roberta asked, would Gail be willing to give the four of us and our cat a place to live ... for free ... until we could find jobs? Gail was struggling to make ends meet herself, but amazingly, she said yes! My husband’s grandmother loaned us \$600. Another friend, Tom, offered to let us use one of his old cars in exchange for me tutoring his teenagers. A little cash and a place to lay our heads for a few weeks, some questionable wheels. It seemed like enough to give us a start, so we sold everything – our tiny house, our old jalopy of a car, everything we could get rid of – and we piled our clothes and beds and pots and pans into a small U-Haul truck, loaded up our two boys and our cat, and drove cross-country to start a new life.

I was able to get a job within just a couple of weeks, at Mississippi State University, where we had gone to graduate school. I was the secretary for the Computer Science Department, and I made \$10,868 a year. But despite our move, my husband was still terribly depressed and could not get his act together to look for work. So, we lived with Gail for a year on my grand salary. I couldn't afford professional clothing, but there was a woman in my department who was about my size. She told me she was cleaning out her closet, and she wondered if I could use any of the things that she was going to take to the thrift store. I noticed she cleaned out her closet a lot.

We qualified for WIC – the Women, Infants, and Children program of the U.S. Agriculture Department, that in Mississippi does not provide assistance in purchasing food. Instead, it brings boxes of agricultural commodities to families in need with small children. We ate a lot of cheese that year. At Christmas time, the staff from the office upstairs from mine asked if they could possibly adopt our family rather than going through the usual Adopt-a-Family program, because they would rather their gifts go to someone they knew. Oh, that was hard to swallow, but I said yes, so our kids could have toys that year.

At the end of that first year, we went through bankruptcy, and on the very day we returned from bankruptcy court, we were really surprised to learn that I was pregnant again. I did not know how we would make it. But somehow that pregnancy changed my perspective. I knew it could not all be on ME anymore. I could do my job. I could take care of my two boys. I could sing in the choir at church. I could tutor Tom's teenagers. And I could take care of this baby I was so surprised to have growing in me. That was all I could do. I couldn't do more than that. And from somewhere, in that moment, my husband found the will to find work. Suddenly, I had a partner again.

It was a long couple of years, a real wilderness journey for our family. Some days it was all I could do to put one foot in front of another. But if a bell rings every time an angel gets her wings, I can promise you that there was an absolute Carol of the Bells playing during that time for all the earthly angels, those angel deacons, who helped us out then. God sends angels when we are in the wilderness.

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Several weeks ago. We read a passage from one of Paul's writings, where he talks about the gifts of the Spirit, and how we should honor each person's different gifts, for all are needed. One of the spiritual gifts Paul mentions is "encouraging." We can all be encouragers for those who are in need. We can be ministers to those who are hurting. We can serve those who are out in the desert of their lives, even if it seems like they are going to be there forever. We can all be deacons. We can be angels.

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Everyone has dark days. Your story will be different from mine, but I know you have one of your own. I know there has been a time in your life when you were in despair, when all you could do was lament. I know there have been times when you weren't sure you could see your way through. Maybe you are in one of those passages now. God does not leave us alone in those times. God sends deacons to us. God sends angels, to encourage us, to heal us, to bring us fresh bread and a bowl of soup, to see us through. So, give thanks with me this day, that "Yes, there is a balm in Gilead. No matter what desert you are wandering in, no matter if you are out in the wilderness in your life, God will send angels to minister to you, and God will heal whatever is causing your pain."

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

Amen