The psalm today as well as the reading from Jeremiah highlight a life-long struggle, not between serving God or money as the Gospel reading teaches, but between serving hope or desolation.

(pause)

In the midst of suffering, even when we believe we have repented of our sins as did the Israelites, why are we not saved? Why does the Lord seem slow to act? “The harvest is past, the summer is ended and we are not saved” cries Jeremiah.

He is probably speaking during the time in Israel’s history just after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, when most of the people were captured and relocated to Babylon; a time when things were very bad for God’s people.

The passage opens with the voice of the prophet or the voice of God, or a mixture of the two, in a lament of grief, rebellion, heart-sickness – or sin-sickness as the hymn says. It is such a dreadful time that Jeremiah asks, “Is there no balm in Gilead?”

(Now Gilead was a region, east of the Jordan River famous for its balm made from the resin of the balsam tree. This fragrant, oily substance was applied to wounds to promote healing.)

But it seems there is no healing for Jeremiah’s people. “Why has the health of my poor people not been restored?” he demands. “Is there no doctor in Gilead?” In other words is there nothing that can heal us?
Jeremiah seems to be teetering on the very edge of desolation, when all hope is lost – hope that the situation will ever improve – hope that life will ever be good again.

Because today’s reading not only begins in lament but also ends with it, which is kind of unusual. Normally a lament ends by praising God in advance for granting the petition – whatever we ask for – in this case, healing. Usually it ends by expressing hope and trust in a God who saves. But today we don’t hear that.

Likewise, psalms of lament usually end with hope in and praise of God. But today’s psalm choice doesn’t, thus punctuating Jeremiah’s point. Does he think that all hope is lost? Is that what it means when a lament ends in lament? That we have lost hope in God’s ability or desire to heal us?

(pause)

Many professors of liturgy complain that there isn’t enough lament in our worship - that we carefully avoid it. Perhaps it’s because of the inherent pressure of American culture for cheeriness.

When we’re suffering, there is a premium placed on appearing happy, on keeping a stiff upper life. There’s a premium placed on how-to books or activities to engage in, all with the goal of helping us move on or quickly move past feelings of desolation.

But being able to lament has an important role in our lives not only for ourselves but also for others we encounter who are suffering. Unless you and I understand lament, we will not be much use to someone who is in a deep, dark place.

“Is there no balm in Gilead?” he or she will ask you. And your answer should not be, “Cheer up” or “Forget about your wounds.” Nor should you answer yourself in that manner when you are suffering. Because it is from our own wounds that we can offer help to others who are in pain. That we can be a balm of healing to them.
“Compassion,” literally meaning “suffering with,” is to keep company with someone else who is in pain. And that includes our God because when anyone is in pain, so too is God.

(pause)

Is it surprising to think that God suffers? In today’s reading from Jeremiah, the lament of the prophet and the lament of God are inseparable, because the prophet is the human voice of God and so Jeremiah’s lament is also God’s; therefore God must be suffering alongside of us, and lamenting through us.

(pause)

Now unlike grief which is one type of suffering, lament arises from suffering. It is a response to it. And unlike grief, there are two sides to it: desolation, alongside of hope for rescue; awareness of the hopeless situation, alongside of the memory of a better time; anger alongside of relief from venting our emotions in the lament; a desire for vengeance alongside of a desire for forgiveness and healing, all of which beat upon the heart of God, and are of the heart of God.

So lament is a form of hope during a time when it might appear that all hope is lost. For if all hope is lost, why bother lamenting? Why bother crying out to God?

Why would God bother crying out in response to the suffering caused by free will – both of humans and of nature. I believe to my very core that God does not cause suffering; rather, God is there with us throughout it.

And so Jeremiah’s words are a fit response for aging people who live alone and wonder about their future; or for those whose loved one is wasting away with dementia or cancer or ALS.

Jeremiah’s words are a fit response for the family of a 13-year-old boy whose life was cut short by a dirt bike accident; or for the family of a man whose health deteriorated so suddenly that they and the doctors couldn’t keep up and had to release him to death before they were ready; “Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears!” “Is there no balm in Gilead?”
Lament is an expression of hope and not of desolation because it can lead to the redemption of such dark times. Even when God is not praised; even when trust is not expressed, a lament reflects the belief that God’s grace accompanies us through such very bad times. And knowing that, can help lead us out of the depths of despair and back into the light of healing.

But sometimes it’s difficult to see that for ourselves. And that’s where you come in. You who pastor each other so well; who have suffered; who have lamented; who have come through it all, back into the light of hope.

The hymn today says that the balm in Gilead is the Holy Spirit reviving our soul again. The Holy Spirit working through all of you who visit, who listen, who pray and cry and lament with anyone who is in pain.

And those of you are suffering yet again, you have companions right here beside you. Comrades with compassion – who are crying out on your behalf - joining with God’s cry for this sin-filled, free-willed world. “Is there no balm in Gilead?”

God is constantly at work in the world through them and you, to heal the wound over time, leaving a scar for sure. A scar that enables you in turn to lament with and for others.

So “There is a balm in Gilead that makes the wounded whole.” That balm is God in Christ – God the Holy Spirit – working through you.

(The source of today’s Sermon is from a Sermon delivered by my Liturgical Music professor while I was at Seminary – The Reverend Doctor Bill Roberts.)