

Written by Zach Mills

“Beyond the Gates of Gilead!”

I saw the crumbled walls. I saw the burned houses. I saw the dead bodies. I saw the wind carry gusts of smoke and ash over the heads of people who were now homeless. In the places where the dirty air had cleared I saw now childless parents gather. Children’s toys lay crushed under the weight of this powerful adversary. The salty, metallic odor from the mixture of sweat and blood dripping from weary bodies saturated my nostrils. The terrible sights and smells of this national tragedy violently assaulted my senses.

As I surveyed the carnage, I began to hear a sound, like a voice moaning. I couldn’t quite make out what this voice was saying because my eardrums were ringing loudly from prolonged exposure to all the destructive noise.

I had *heard* the crying of newly-orphaned children piercing the putrid air. I had *heard* the continuous moans of those sick and diseased people who had been displaced from their usual health care providers. I *heard* the sadistic silence of the apathetic.

My ears were so wounded, so numbed by the sounds of despair, that it was difficult to decode this voice. It sounded like one voice at first. Then it sounded like a thousand voices. A thousand weary wounded voices all crying out: “Why do we continue to suffer in a world where there are abundant healing resources? Has God forsaken us?”

By now, it is possible that your minds have filled with contemporary narratives of suffering. You may have pictured images of a demolished Gulf coast, snapshots of a

dilapidated lower ninth ward in New Orleans, or perhaps glimpses of a burning Baghdad or a ravaged Darfur. Maybe even a bloody college campus in Virginia. But this scene of destruction and this lamenting voice come not from current reports in the New York Times or in electronic news wires, but from an ancient report chronicled within the annals of Jeremiah during the time of the Babylonian Exile.

When the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. they demolished the city. The walls, crumbled. The houses, burned. The Temple, destroyed. People were killed, kept as prisoners or sent into exile. And as the prophet Jeremiah surveys the carnage, he weeps along with the people in a poetic lament which culminates in a profound desire for healing. *“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?”* It’s scary how similar this lamenting voice sounds to our voices as we survey the carnage of the national and international tragedies of our time.

Listen. Can you hear this voice exploding in Iraq, as people continue to become the collateral damage of governments jockeying for positions of power. Can you hear this voice within the screams of those being tortured and killed in Darfur? Can you hear it ascending from the Gulf coast? Can you hear it in all those who are lamenting because of their own experiences of exile?

Sadly, the world is full of the sounds of these suffering voices. However, today I would like to tune our theological ears to one voice in particular. Let us listen to the voice of people in the black community in America suffering from HIV and AIDS. Indeed, the HIV/AIDS pandemic crosses geographic and cultural boundaries. However, the problem is so immense that we would be wise to not overestimate how much we can

do and spread ourselves too thin. Success at home in our communities can provide the groundwork for broader movements beyond the gates of our communities.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that even though African Americans account for about 12-13 percent of the U.S. population, they account for about half (49%) of the people in America who get HIV and AIDS. According to the CDC, the reasons for infection are not directly related to race or ethnicity, but rather a variety of societal barriers faced by many African Americans. These barriers include poverty and sexually transmitted diseases. Another barrier is that of the social stigma (negative attitudes, beliefs, and actions directed at people living with HIV and AIDS or actions directed at people who do things that put themselves at risk for HIV infection.¹ These stigmas could lead health officials and others to discriminate and provide little or no treatment or education to African Americans.

All these barriers are potential problems and must be addressed. However, one barrier not mentioned by the CDC is a major contributing factor to the high rates of HIV and AIDS cases in the black community. That barrier is the silence of the African American pulpit. Though the Black Church still occupies a central role in many black communities, sermons and Bible Studies have been shockingly sparse with messages directly addressing HIV and AIDS.

Preachers have avoided the issue for a variety of reasons: Addressing HIV and AIDS necessarily involves a serious discussion of sex and sexuality; addressing HIV and AIDS necessarily involves redefining messages of prosperity as peripheral to messages of personal health; and addressing HIV and AIDS necessary involves shedding the fear of

¹ This information was taken from the HIV/AIDS and African Americans Fact Sheet located on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's official website (www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/aa/index.htm).

being criticized for discussing such a “taboo” topic from the “sacred” space of the pulpit. The body is sacred and any force that allows the body to be hurt is taboo! Sadly, many of our church leaders are not willing to take on this responsibility and revise their notions of pastoral leadership as a service to the community and not to the self.

The African American pulpit has the power to take the poisonous material of suffering and concoct powerful healing balm. In the case of HIV and AIDS in the Black Church, the balm is precisely the commitment to not be silent. Messages of prevention will be the balm that prevents future generations from being infected by the present generation’s legacy of silence. The current statistics reveal that there is a serious consequence for being silent.

So, let us listen to those voices of those who are suffering from the disease. And let us respond by speaking. If we pay attention to these voices we’ll realize that those with HIV and AIDS are asking the same question that the weeping prophet and his people were asking thousands of years ago is the same question being asked today: “Why do we continue to suffer in a world where there are abundant healing sources?”

Jeremiah interpreted the Babylonian Exile to be God punishing the people because of their idolatry and unfaithfulness. I wrestled for a long time with Jeremiah about this interpretation. Most of us have heard similar interpretations from preachers or stories about preachers who have suggested that people with HIV and AIDS received the disease as punishment for having sex outside of marriage. It is a scary thing to imagine a God who works that way. The God that I believe in does not reign down wrath for every bad or ill-advised decision. So Jeremiah and I wrestled for a while about the issue of theodicy. But after much wrestling I think Jeremiah and I have come to an agreement. I

think we agree that human beings must realize that destructive behavior yields destructive consequences.

It may not be a consequence that God rains down from heaven but it's a consequence nonetheless. In reference to Jeremiah's readers, sowing seeds of idolatry and evil actions toward others will produce terrible harvests. In reference to HIV and AIDS in the Black Church, we can't have casual, unprotected sex and expect to escape the consequence of contracting a disease. We can't be silent from pulpits about the subjects of sex and HIV and AIDS and expect to prevent the spreading of the disease. To be sure, there are other factors that contribute to the spread of the disease, such as rape, and infidelity both singles and married couples. The reason the seasons pass and healing is delayed has more to do with the unfaithfulness of humanity to each other than it has to do with God.

For example, some of the current tragedies in this nation are in fact the harvests of seeds of idolatry, apathy and silence that we have sown. Consider the tragedy of the U.S. health care system. The seasons pass but yet many American corporations continue to pursue profits over people—meanwhile millions of American children are without health insurance. Consider the tragedy within the American school system. The seasons pass, but yet billions of dollars are dumped into war campaigns—meanwhile inner-city schools still suffer the same wounds of neglected children, broken buildings, scattered staff and sparse supplies. The seasons pass but yet our precious environment is still decimated; still killing in Iraq, still rape in Darfur, still injustice in New Orleans, still homelessness in Nashville, still HIV and AIDS cases rising in our communities, still!

Our actions *do* have consequences. When we adopt destructive behavior and refuse to change destruction is an inevitable harvest. When we fail to either resist destructive behaviors or speak out against topics of injustice that are considered “taboo,” then horrible crops will sprout someday. The current HIV and AIDS pandemic in the black community is the harvest of seeds of silence and carelessness sown in previous generations. Jeremiah’s lament teaches us that destructive behaviors lead to destructive consequences.

So what good news could we find in this text? There only seems to be the sad reminder that the roots of our destructive actions towards each other—in whatever shape or form—run deep. How does one find good news in such a profound lament? Well, it depends on the reader.

A good friend of mine has been going through a tough time. My friend’s situation is not as serious as Israel’s exile or the HIV and AIDS pandemic. However, he has been in despair and in need of healing. He recently described being burnt out and is struggling to find joy in his relationship with God. I recently asked him to read this passage in Jeremiah and offer some insight for this sermon. He read the scripture silently. Several seconds later a grin flashed across his face as he experienced a new revelation. He said to me, “Every time I have read this scripture before, the voice inflection has been wrong in my mind.” My friend had been reading this text as it has often been read, as a despairing interrogative sentence, “*Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?*” But when he read the scripture this time he heard within himself a new tone, not an interrogative sentence, but a declarative one, “*Is there no balm in Gilead! Is there no*

physician there!” My friend turned to me and said joyfully, “The text implies that there *is* balm there!”

In this moment my friend read this text the way the Black Church has traditionally read it—not as the woeful culmination of a hope lost in the form of a question, but as the declarative climactic crescendo of hope awaiting fulfillment. The black church has taken that despairing squiggly line known as a question mark and straightened it into a powerful exclamation!

What a brilliant rhetorical device the writer of Jeremiah uses here. In the midst of despair, there is the reminder that a powerful source of unchanging healing and hope is at work. Gilead was a city that had the natural resources used to produce powerful healing balm. This balm was extracted from a special kind of tree that only grew within the gates of Gilead. The writer of Jeremiah uses Gilead as a metaphor for God and heaven. The writer knew that readers would have automatically associated Gilead with images of abundant resources of healing ointment and skilled physicians.

Amazing. Jeremiah uses the image of Gilead, a renowned center of healing, to give suffering people a visual symbol of a healing God. SMILE. Gilead was a real place. People knew if they could just get to Gilead, they had a chance to be healed. Gilead was the physical, tangible manifestation of profound healing power. And I’ve got good news for you. Gilead still exists today.

Just look around the sanctuary next time you’re in church. The African American pulpit, like Gilead, has the ability to concoct powerful healing balm. The moment we step into church on Sunday morning, we enter historically renowned centers of healing. Just like Jeremiah’s Gilead, the black pulpit’s reputation has a healer precedes it. We’ve

heard about the power of the black pulpit. And most of us believe if we can just make it to the house of God we'll have a chance to experience God's healing power. Today, as members of the Black Church, we are patients of a modern-day Gilead. But we are not only patients, we are also physicians.

Sisters and brothers, I must challenge you, it is quite a responsibility to be physicians of Gilead. So, let us be responsible health practitioners. In regards to HIV and AIDS in the Black Church, the reason the seasons pass and the health of our people is not restored is because of the sin of malpractice, the sin of unfaithful action towards others in the form of silence and careless behaviors.

Though the season of Lent has past, let us, in true Lenten fashion, continue to conduct self-examinations so that we are not tempted to renounce or abuse our callings as agents of healing and transformation. Let us resist the seduction to lecture and sermonize with sanctimonious platitudes with no intention of ever actually embodying our messages inside and outside the gates of our houses of worship. Let us resist the ambition to privatize our healing resources and sell them only to the highest bidder. Let us resist the temptation to stay comfortably behind Gilead's gates and use our status for personal gain instead of communal transformation.

Let us realize that some people are not able to make it to Gilead for a variety of reasons. So once we get organized and make progress domestically, let us extend our work beyond the *Beyond the Gates of Gilead*. Let us mimic God's action through Jesus and go beyond the gleaming gates of Gilead to *give* balm to those who suffer. Notice how Jesus did not commit his spirit to God until after he went beyond the gates of

Jerusalem to a place where all could see him. Some have called it an old, rugged, cursed cross, but I will always see that old cross as Calvary's version of a Gilead balm tree.

Just like the medicine in a balm tree, that precious blood had been brewing for some time, just waiting to be poured out for us. It's good to know that even when we suffer, God's healing power is not absent, but is brewing. There is no known cure for HIV and AIDS. We must work to make the current drugs affordable and available to all who need it. Although there is no cure for HIV and AIDS, there is a balm that can prevent future infections. It's the courage of the African American pulpit to stand face to face with our giant adversary and boldly proclaim that we will not go *silently* and carelessly into the grave. There is balm that can defeat this foe. And it's brewing right now.

It's brewing right now, in the cosmos and within the thoughtful minds and prayerful ministries of the members of the Black Church. The good news is that people hearing these words are preparing to leave Gilead's gates as theological surgeons who will cut deeply through thick layers of ecclesial narcissism to lift from the body of Christ the gangrenous strains of silent theology. Oh, there's balm brewing!

The good news is that there are people hearing these words who will go beyond the gates of the Black Church as preachers and teachers who will use their skills in content and clarity, cadence and color, passion and precision, to skillfully corner the infectious diseases plaguing those irresponsible sermons and Bible studies that preach prosperity over the personal health. I said *there is balm brewing!*

The good news is that soon all of us might be inspired to go beyond gates of the Gilead of the Black Church as outspoken voices to distant lands. But, in the meantime,

while we are organizing making our final preparations domestically, let us not listen passively anymore to the profound laments of those calling from the ashes of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. While the balm is brewing, let us *not* continue to sow seeds of future destruction by our present inaction and our silence.

But rather, let us go down from the gates of Gilead share the good news: “*There’s balm brewing up in Gilead!*” It’s OK if we don’t have the balm ready just yet. It’s enough just to go down from Gilead and let it be known that the black pulpit is ready, willing and able to begin brewing a balm that can end this pandemic. But don’t you dare go down from Gilead without a song. You’ll get discouraged along the way and you’ll need a song to remind you that the message you carry is true. When you meet with health officials and read their statistics on HIV and AIDS in our communities in the U.S., you’ll get discouraged. When you visit Africa, you’ll get discouraged. When you meet those bishops with the boils of apathy and the lesions of silence, when you meet those preachers and evangelists with the leprosy of neglect, you’ll get discouraged. Yes, sometimes you’ll get discouraged and feel you’re work is in vain.

That’s why you take a song with you. The song reminds you that there is a power in the universe that assists us in our “perennial struggle”² with every force that attempts to negate life. The song will revive your soul. So sing that song loudly to encourage yourself as you pass through America, Africa and other distant lands. Sing it through your despair and frustration. Sing that song in the enduring spirit of our ancestors until you get called back to Gilead.

Oh, I can hear the words of the song I’ll sing, “I may be hard pressed on every side, but I’m not crushed. I may be perplexed, but I’m not in utter despair. I may be

² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 78

struck down, but I am not destroyed. Because I am convinced, I do believe, I am reminded that there is balm that comes from the black pulpit. ‘There is a balm up in Gilead that can make the wounded whole. There is a balm up there in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul!’” Amen.