I travel light through life, but there are certain things I always carry. I always carry my minimalist wallet here, and this utilitarian key ring. I always have my trusty mini Swiss Army knife with several neat features like an LED light and ballpoint pen to mention a few. And I always carry a tube of lip balm on me. My lips dry out in the winter when the humidity is low, and also in the summer when the air is blowing in my face on a motorcycle. Lip balm protects and it soothes.

There are other kinds of balm that do the same. Bag Balm is a product originally made for cow udders, which sometimes get chaffed and irritated, but it works great as a hand and body moisturizer if you are not too particular about that greasy feel. Online I came across a product called Honest Amish Beard Balm guaranteed to make dried out scraggly beard dudes look like lumberjacks from a magazine ad. Yeah, I’ll bet the Amish buy this stuff online all the time.

Balms go back a long way as we will find in our text for today, from which we get the title of our message: “The Balm of Gilead.” Gilead was a mountainous region east of the Jordan River and situated in modern day Jordan. We have a Mt. Gilead in Ohio between Columbus and Mansfield. I just rode through it for the first time several weeks ago. It is indeed a hilly town, all the more noticeable because it is otherwise surrounded by flatlands. I suppose that is how it got its name, by association with a hilly region in Israel.

That area of the Holy Land must constitute a micro-climate where distinctive herbs and spices are known to grow. In particular there is a balsam called the Storax Tree which grows on rocky slopes. It has a balsamic resin used to make a balm; much like today’s Pine Tar Soap is made from the pitch of a pine tree. In ancient times healing properties were attributed to this Balm from Gilead, and it was traded far and wide. You may recall from the book of Genesis how Joseph was sold by his brothers to a caravan of traders. As it is written: …they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt (Genesis 37:25).

Not surprisingly, balm was also used as a metaphor for soothing comfort and healing in the Bible. “Messiah” is a Hebrew word that means the same thing as the Greek word
“Christ”: anointed one. Among other roles like preacher and teacher, Jesus was a healer. His anointing spilled over on to the disciples who were also sent to heal the sick. The author of our text will use the balm of Gilead as a metaphor for healing. But first he describes the deep wound that needs healing.

He begins: *O my Comforter in sorrow, my heart is faint within me* (Verse 18). The author of our text is the prophet Jeremiah. Most prophets received tough callings—specifically the calling to preach to people who refused to listen—and Jeremiah was no exception. Do you know how hard it would be for me to preach if you were all wearing earbuds right now? I might get a dashed perception if someone were to yell “yes” while I was making a point, only to find that the Indians had just scored a three run homer.

It was worse for Jeremiah. Nobody even showed up. When you see cartoons of the ragged prophet carrying a sign reading “The End is Near,” or “Repent Before It’s Too Late,” or “Beware Of the Wrath of God”—that was Jeremiah. Everybody thought he was a crank and they didn’t pay attention to him. It is like when parents try to warn their youth about the dangers of driving while distracted, or how sex promiscuity can lead to unplanned pregnancies or about how addiction can sneak up on the unsuspecting casual user. All the while their youth have this pained but blank look on their faces as if to say “sweet angle of death take me now.”

Why waste your breath? Because they are your own flesh and blood. Jeremiah is speaking to his own flesh and blood who are at extreme risk for being brutalized by their enemies. He sees a devastating defeat coming, and the cries of his soon-to-be exiled people to a seemingly absent God. *Listen to the cry of my people from a land far away: “Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King no longer there?”* Then God responds: “*Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?*” (Verse 19).

Because the people turned away from God to more permissive gods, the Almighty could no longer protect them from their enemies. Babylon, in particular, was just about at the door and ready to break it down. Jeremiah could see it coming, and there was nothing he could do about it. *The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved* (Verse 20). Can you imagine planting your seeds just as a rainy spring begins? Most off the seed rots and fails to germinate. What does germinate is then consumed by a drought that follows the rains. What does survive the drought barely produces a crop. Now the harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved—we don’t have anything to eat during the coming winter and famine.

This is how Jeremiah is feeling. There had been time to turn things around, but no longer. A looming disaster has been set in motion. He sees it coming soon and there is nothing he can do about it. We’re not talking about a small issue here, we’re taking about a country being overrun by its enemies, it’s capital being burned to the ground together with its temple and palace, its king being paraded around with a noose around his neck like a dog, its survivors being brutalized and then reduced to slaves who are
relocated to a foreign land where they have no rights. We’re talking about Jeremiah’s people here.

Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me (Verse 21). Jeremiah is not gloating over his crushed people saying, “I told you so. You wouldn’t listen. You brought this on yourself.” No, that would be like gloating over your own child who was life flighted to the hospital after crashing the car into a pole. Your child is paralyzed and hanging on to life. You aren’t going to gloat. You are too crushed for that. This is your child. These were Jeremiah’s people.

Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people (9:1). Jeremiah is known by biblical scholars as “The Weeping Prophet,” and this verse explains why. Jeremiah grieved for his people. If Jeremiah cannot construct a future for his people, he cannot construct a future for himself. Right? If we cannot construct a future for our children—for those God has given us to love—we cannot construct a future for ourselves. We are depressed and without hope.

Jeremiah is without hope and depressed. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? (Verse 22). Jeremiah is giving expression to the hopelessness of his people. As a prophet he speaks for God to his people, but as a fellow human being he speaks for his people to God. In the process he shows his people where to turn in their distress. Remember the opening words of our text: O my Comforter in sorrow….”

God comforts in sorrow. God soothes in distress. God is a balm for the wounded. He may be abrasive and irritating when we are going astray, but once we are in deep trouble he becomes the balm that brings healing. Later on in Jeremiah’s prophesy God reassures the exiles: I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me (33:6-8).

Sometimes the rebellious have to be brought low before they can hear the Almighty. They sure couldn't hear him when he was speaking through his prophet Jeremiah in the buildup to the devastation. But once they were humbled sufficiently, they could hear the prophetic word that was spoken to them—not only the doom and gloom that attends sinful rebellion, but the healing and soothing comfort that attends repentance and a turning back to God.

That is why God called prophets like Jeremiah to preach to people who were not listening. When parents tell their children about the dangers of things like sex and drugs and driving irresponsibly, and their children look like they could care less about another lecture from Mom and Dad, a seed gets planted in their thick skulls and hard hearts. How could it not? Deep down they know that no one loves and cares for them like Mom and Dad.
You never know when that seed might germinate. It might be in the heat of passion when a voice from deep down shouts out a warning. It might be when the car is full of raging teenagers and the radio is blaring, or it might be when the pills are being passed around that seed of warning germinates and bears fruit in a wise chose rather than a foolish one. That is why parents must speak when their rebellious youth are rolling their eyes and acting like know-it-alls.

That is why God sent his prophets to speak when nobody was listening, because eventually they did listen. “Jeremiah warned us this would happen. We should have listened to him. What else did he say? I remember something about turning back to God no matter how bad the situation got, and God would turn back to us. I remember something about the balm of Gilead—finding comfort in God when all else seemed lost. I remember something about the repentant returning to rebuild our homeland.

And so it was that the exiles invented houses of worship called synagogues to replace their destroyed temple. They pieced together their holy scriptures and kept alive their sacred traditions. They put their hope and trust in God’s promises, and they waited patiently for their deliverance. And just like their exile eventually arrived much to Jeremiah’s grief, so their chance to return eventually arrived when the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians. In the meanwhile they found soothing comfort like the balm of Gilead in God’s word to them.

Sometimes the things that bring healing hurt before they soothe. Alcohol, which sanitizes a wound, burns. Peroxide, which kills infections, stings and froths. The first person who used peroxide on a cut I had was Marti the nurse at church camp for so many years. Marti would say, “There’s no such thing as JUST a cut,” and she was big on peroxide. She told me it would sting a little, and that it might help to blow on it, but to watch for it to bubble up because that meant it was killing things that cause infection. So I put up with the sting because it meant that healing was happening. Maybe the same thing happens with certain antiseptic balms.

It is certainly follows that if excessive pride makes us deaf to God’s Word to us, then some stinging humility might be required to heal our deafness. So when we find ourselves exiled from the Promised Land, and feeling hopeless and helpless, maybe God is trying to tell us something that we have not been inclined to hear. Maybe he is chafing us until we search out the balm of Gilead that can soothe our souls. Even Jeremiah fell into a pit of despair over his despairing people, asking: Is there no balm in Gilead? The biblical witness and the spiritual traditions handed down to us and at least one great hymn of faith answer: “There is a Balm in Gilead.”