

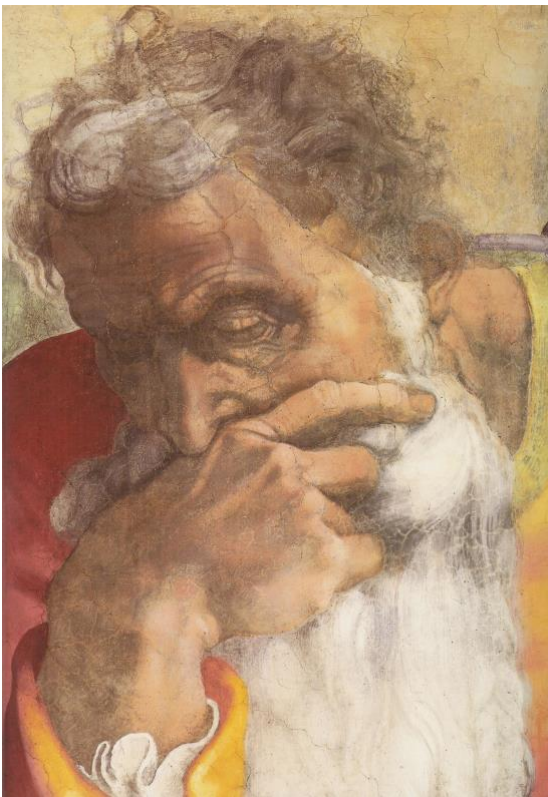
# THERE IS A BALM IN GILEAD

*traditional spiritual*  
*arranged by Douglas Mears*

## ***Instrumentation***

Solo Voice (or Unison Choir)  
Piano

## ***Notes***



Jeremiah, often referred to as “the weeping prophet,” was greatly troubled by his society’s steady moral and spiritual decay. He relentlessly tried to warn the people of Judah that their world was about to collapse into ruin because the privileged among them—the greedy, selfish, frivolous, and power-hungry—had forgotten and neglected the poor, sick, and elderly. When the people continued to ignore Jeremiah’s plea for reform, in utter frustration, he bewailed, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” (Jeremiah 8:22)

Gilead was a mountainous region of ancient Palestine, east of the Jordan River, now corresponding to northwest Jordan. From ancient times, this area was known for its healing balm. Spice caravans passed through Gilead, and traders sought a precious medicinal ointment made from a particular flowering shrub’s sap. In his anguish at what was about to happen,

Jeremiah lamented that, even in Gilead, famous for its healing plant, there seemed to be no hope. It was a cry of complete despair.

Centuries later, enslaved African-Americans took Jeremiah’s question, turned it around, and boldly proclaimed, Yes! “There is a balm in Gilead.” Their refrain offers encouragement and dares to respond with hope in the face of hopelessness, showing courage in the face of despair. African American theologian Howard Thurman (1899-1981) points out that “The slave caught the mood of this spiritual dilemma and with it did an amazing thing. He straightened the question mark in Jeremiah’s sentence into an exclamation point: ‘There *is* a balm in Gilead!’ Here is the note of creative triumph.”



This quality of “triumph” in the face of despair infuses *There is a Balm in Gilead* with hope, comfort, and encouragement and helps to secure its place in the extraordinary canon of African-American spirituals.