

We will spend one more week with Isaiah. But who here wants to know more about these prophets at some point? Good because the lectionary only takes us through Proto Isaiah and clearly there's a lot more under the hood.

Today's passage of scripture from Isaiah is known as the song of the vineyard. It's considered a love song. But let's talk about vineyards for a moment.

Vineyards are an important part of biblical literature in general. Both the Old and New Testaments contain important stories about vineyards. From Genesis we have the story of Noah's Vineyard. Noah partook of the fruit of the vine and got naked drunk. His son Ham laughed while Sham and Japheth covered him up. In 1 Kings we have the story of the vineyard of Naboth. King Ahab wanted it and was willing to murder to get it.

Vineyards were also an important part of life in the Ancient Eastern world. Vineyards produced wines and wines had many uses. Pure water wasn't always plentiful. Wine would be diluted with water to reduce the alcoholic content and provide hydration. Yes wine was a daily staple. It was also used in religious rituals across all religions of that day. Libations as Paul would mention in his letter to the Philippians. Wine was a symbol of social status. It was an important export product for Israel. Wines from Israel were some of the most sought after wines during the Roman period.

The importance of vineyards stretches all the way back 6000 BC, so Judah and Northern Israel would be well versed in them. They would know what is involved in both tending a vineyard and making wine. They would know that vineyards could be interspersed among fruit trees or a dedicated plot. They would know that according to Levitical law, a new vineyard could not be harvested until the 4th year. All of this would have been known even back in Isaiah's time.

That brings us back to our passage today from Isaiah chapter 5. It will be the first time that the actual voice of Isaiah is heard. But only for a brief moment. And how does God choose to use this powerful voice? To help him sing a love song. Isaiah is singing about the owner who loves

and the vineyard, the owner's lover. The owner is? God. That vineyard is composed of both Judah and Northern Israel. Yes these kingdoms are divided, but they are still children of Abraham. They are still God's people.

Isaiah goes on to describe the lengths to which God had gone to tend and cultivate his vineyard.

The owner digs and digs and digs. He hauls load after load of rocks. He goes to Star Nursery (of Bethlehem of course) and picks out the very finest vines. The owner is very protective of his vines. So He takes the rocks and builds a watchtower for the vineyard. He still has rocks left over so he builds a wall. They're going to have to work pretty hard on the outside to invade. He even took time to build a wine press so that wine could be made the minute the grapes were ready. And then it's time for the wait. Waiting and waiting and waiting. One year, two years, three years. Finally it's the fourth year. Time to go back to the vineyard and taste the grapes.

The owner has gone to so many lengths. As he travels to the vineyard he imagines popping one of those beautiful ripe grapes in his mouth. How sweet they will be. How juicy. Oh how fragrant the fruit of those vines. He arrives at the vineyard. First he walks the rows to admire the vines, laden with grapes. They are beautiful. Shimmering. Plump. Everything you'd look for in a perfect grape. The owner reaches out and plucks a big, beautiful, juicy grape. He brings it to his mouth. Pops it in there. You know what you would expect biting down. Plump skin breaking. Juice running out. Sweetness washing your mouth. More sweetness as the pulp melts in your mouth.

Not at all what the owner got. It was plump. The skin broke. The juice ran out. The taste, total and unadulterated sourness. These grapes literally stunk on the inside. Who here has had a sour patch kid? Or those war heads? Even sweet tarts! That brings back memories of the city pool snack bar. That's what the owner tasted.

Who has ever given their baby something sour, on purpose? Then you remember their reactions. Something like this:

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Just like these babies, the owner did not ask for this sourness. He trusted that what he would taste would be sweet and delicious. So what happened? How did this vineyard come to produce this rotten, sour fruit? We'll get there in a minute but first we get to hear from the owner himself.

Imagine the owner pacing back and forth, looking up once in a while at his vineyard. Muttering questions. What more could I have done? I picked a prime location for my vineyard. I made the soil ready. I broke my back removing all of those stones. I only planted the best vines. I built walls and a watch tower to protect it. All of this leads to the next logical question, Why oh why after all of this did, I end up with sour grapes?

The owner doesn't wait long on answers to either of these questions. The owner is moved to action. First the protections. Walls and hedges removed. No more pruning, no more cultivating. The weeds? Let them run wild. Briers and thorns you are welcome. Clouds? I will not let them bring rain. And that right there is where the identity of the owner is revealed. Who is the owner? God. And the vineyard is Judah and Northern Israel. Both are still intact at this moment.

Now it's our turn to ask a question. Why? Why did the grapes turn sour. Why was all of this brought on Judah. Weren't they God's chosen people? Weren't they favored by God? Yes as long as they followed the Levitical laws of God. And God looked at how these were being followed. Which brings us to verse 7 and a Hebrew pun. A pun doesn't translate well into English. Let me say it and then let me show it.

Show slides

God looked for justice and saw bloodshed. God looked for righteousness but heard the cries of distress. Bloodshed instead of justice. Distress or iniquity instead of righteousness.

Let's look at the Hebrew spellings for a moment. We have mispat for justice and mispah for bloodshed. Then we have sedaqa for righteousness and seaqa for cries of the oppressed. In each case only one letter is needed to change the meaning. That is how razor thin the line is between right and wrong. Jesus didn't have it wrong when he said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

For us this is where the courtroom drama ends. And yes this song is another courtroom drama. Who is the judge? And who is the accused? And yet who are God's beloved?

As you've been hearing this story of the vineyard, has it brought any other stories to mind? If it made you think of the parable of the tenants from Matthew 21, it should have. Jesus clearly had today's song in mind when he told this story. Just as the vineyard rejected its owner, so would the tenants reject the owner of the vineyard in Jesus's story.

So ok, Pastor Amy. This is all well and good. But what does this mean for us today? Well it makes me think of a very popular saying ascribed to John Wesley. "'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can'"

This is the assignment. It started back when the law was delivered, and it continues today. When we seek justice. When we stand for the oppressed. When we resist iniquity, we will produce the best fruit. Plump, ripe, juicy, and delicious.

CS Lewis had this to say about how we grow the sweetest vineyards. "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most were just those who thought most of the NEXT. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither."

Church family, even today we are God's vineyard. How are we doing with justice and righteousness? Let's be sweet fruit, aimed at heaven.