

Sermon Prepared by Sarah Sanderson-Doughty for St. Andrew's Presbyterian Portland

Let me sing for my loved one a love song for his vineyard.

My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

2 He dug it, cleared away its stones, planted it with excellent vines, built a tower inside it, and dug out a wine vat in it. He expected it to grow good grapes— but it grew rotten grapes.

3 So now, you who live in Jerusalem, you people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard:

4 What more was there to do for my vineyard that I haven't done for it?

When I expected it to grow good grapes, why did it grow rotten grapes?

5 Now let me tell you what I'm doing to my vineyard. I'm removing its hedge, so it will be destroyed. I'm breaking down its walls, so it will be trampled.

6 I'll turn it into a ruin; it won't be pruned or hoed,

and thorns and thistles will grow up. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.

7 The vineyard of the Lord of heavenly forces is the house of Israel,

and the people of Judah are the plantings in which God delighted.

God expected justice, but there was bloodshed; righteousness, but there was a cry of distress!

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots.

2 The Lord's spirit will rest upon him,

a spirit of wisdom and understanding,

a spirit of planning and strength,

a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

3 He will delight in fearing the Lord. He won't judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay.

4 He will judge the needy with righteousness, and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth; by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist. **-Common English Bible**

Sometimes song lyrics stump me. I lack the context necessary to understand them or they are so deeply poetic I can't quite grasp what they are trying to express. But other times song lyrics reach in and wrap themselves around my heart, moving me in a way little else can. In Isaiah chapter 5 we have a very odd love song to Judah, the remnant of Israel based in Jerusalem, sung after the northern kingdom of Israel has been devastated by Assyria and the southern kingdom of Judah has become a vassal state to Assyria. I have to admit that at first I can't follow these song lyrics at all... Who's singing? To whom? For who's vineyard? Why are we talking about a vineyard? If you were lost as I read... I understand. I was lost as I studied. Part of this is because of the way the song is written— only by the time we get to verse seven do we learn that the vineyard is Israel, the vintner is God, the singer is the prophet.

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There may be a reason for this delayed reveal. The singer wants the people to get caught up in the tragedy of a vineyard painstakingly cultivated only to yield rotten grapes. People would get the back breaking work of digging, clearing away stones, planting, building, more digging... and would know that after all that work comes a wait... and would get how high expectations would be after so much hard work and waiting... and how devastating the disappointment of those expectations would be. For people who know something about gardening, or farming, or vineyards in particular... these lyrics reach in and wrap themselves around their agrarian hearts. They would feel the pain of the vintner— much like Hosea's poetry evoked the pain of parents— They might understand the anger, and the choice to neglect the disappointing vineyard... They'd appreciate the frustration. Gardens, farms, vineyards— they are supposed to produce abundance— more than the planter needs for themselves, abundance to bless many. If a garden, a farm, a vineyard fails to produce abundance.... This is deeply sad. And those who first heard this song would get it.

So when the reveal comes that they are the vineyard, and God is the vintner... they are perhaps more ready to understand the extent of their alienation from their generous creator, savior, and sustainer. Straight judgmental critique may have led them to put up a wall to defend themselves. A song might have better reached their hearts. Virtually every genre of music has been used for social critique— used to raise consciousness and deepen awareness. And so, I think it was, for the prophets, particularly for the 8th century prophets speaking to the disintegrating kingdom of Israel. At the end of verse seven we hear that the harvest God was expecting was justice, but instead got bloodshed; God expected righteousness, but instead got a cry of distress. These are some particularly effective lyrics in the Hebrew, lost on us in English— Justice is *Mishpat*, Bloodshed is *Mishpach*, a difference in one sound. Righteousness is *Tzedekah*, Cry of distress is *Tze'akah*, again a difference in one sound. So close yet so far apart — like a rotten grape on a vine— almost but definitely not what is expected.

When the song begins we are led to anticipate vines filled with juicy grapes, an abundant harvest produced by the vintner's generosity, hard work, and effort... when the song ends, we see a ruined, abandoned, devastated vineyard... and if this were the only song sung, it would

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seem that God's people Israel, they are finished. But the prophet has more songs to sing on God's behalf. And if the refrain of the song we heard last week was "I'm never gonna let you go" the refrain of the song that unfolds in chapter 11 is "there is yet hope." Even if the kingdom of Israel is reduced to a stump— that's all that's left in the previous vineyard— God can yet bring life out of that stump, and God will. God will send a leader, a leader in David's line, one who is not a conqueror but a sage. One whose weapons are words and speech. One oriented to the needs of the poor and the vulnerable, and against the violent and unjust. God will bring the righteousness and justice that God originally hoped to produce through God's people. God will send the leader they need. God's story never ends with devastation. God's story ends with abundant harvest.

As Israel experienced the crumbling of their kingdom, the displacement of their people, eventually the loss of their temple... they had no reason to believe that anything good could come to or for them. Some of them may have let the prophet's song grip their hearts and they believe their ruin appropriate. But some may also have let the hope of the prophet's singing reach them as well, may have been gripped by the promise of God. A promise of a better future pulled back into the present, a vision that transcends the experienced reality of the present. This is a gift we, too, need. As one scholar put it

For most of us in 21st century America, the question is where is there a compelling vision that captures our imagination, captures our hope, captures our loyalty, and emboldens us with confidence that the God who has promised is bringing it about, and that if this is the will of God then that's what claims my loyalty, that's what claims my faith, that's what claims my imagination. It's a word that was spoken out of Isaiah's future into his present. In the person of Christ we still see that sense of the future coming into our present and challenging the forces that would drag us into cynicism and make us say 'no way,' to that God says 'I'll make a way.' (*paraphrase from Working Preacher Podcast*)

We get on board with God's way when we orient ourselves to bearing fruit, the fruit of justice and righteousness, on behalf of our neighbors today, when we let the Spirit of God who lives in us to stir us to generous service. The enormity of the world's need, the devastation all around us, the threats and the dangers... they are all too big for us and they can lead us to

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want to bury our heads, to check out, to give up... but God wants to bring a harvest through us. And it's not all on us. God is working through many, many people. As one puts it,

Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend that part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip towards an enduring good. (*Clarissa Pinkola Estes as quoted by Marci Glass*)

We can take some comfort in the “many, many people” working alongside us, but let's take the greatest comfort in the fact that ultimately GOD is working through us... the God who loves us so much God tries again and again to help us get it right, the God who sets limits on our destructive behavior and brings blessings to the pursuit of life and love, the God who demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that life and love will always have the final word.

So we make our commitments today, commitments to provide sanctuary in and through St. A's in 2024, one small piece of stretching out to mend the part of the world within our reach, to align ourselves with the God who brings a shoot out of a stump, hope out of despair, life out of death.

Resources in addition to scripture that influenced or were cited in this sermon:
Marci Glass. “Many Verses to God's Love Song” on RevGalBlogPals Narrative Lectionary Commentary.
<https://revgalblogpals.org/2019/11/12/narrative-lectionary-many-verses-to-gods-love-song/>
“Isaiah's Vineyard Song” on I Love to Tell the Story, the WorkingPreacher Narrative Lectionary Podcast, episode #38, https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1189