

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.17.25

Isaiah 5:1-7

I will sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten grapes.

And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield rotten grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a wasteland; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished garden; he expected justice but saw bloodshed; righteousness but heard a cry! (219)

The naiveté of the Lord here is almost sweet, wouldn't you say? He is shocked that there's been bloodshed amidst his beloved vineyard, shocked that there's been cause to cry out. He'd given them everything. Cleared soil, choice vines. What more could he have done? What more could he have given them?

I mean, aren't you shocked that you can bring people together, provide them with resources, allow them to govern themselves, and it comes to this injustice, cause for crying out? Just like that first time, when there was enslavement in Egypt and the enslaved cried out and the Lord heard their cry and sent Moses to lead them north, over the sea, into a land that would be a new beginning. Milk. Honey. Edenic. A new people! A beloved people. A fresh chance at it going right this time.

But, no. Not now. Not yet, anyway. Here again, the Lord, expecting righteousness, heard a cry!

What is *wrong* with us?

This is the story of the Lord and the creation since the beginning. That's what Marilynne Robinson says. In her book, *Reading Genesis*, which we read as a church book club, she makes the case that this whole story of God-with-us is one of God coming to terms with the persistent fact of human violence, violence even interwoven into the creation. There's just something about what he has made that prepares the ground not only for human glory and wonder, human creativity and genius, insight and curiosity and deep relatedness, but also for violence, violence and injustice,

violence and cruelty. This is a long story of God going back to the drawing board, ever returning to that drawing board, to come up with a new device, a new configuration, a new set of proscriptions and prescriptions, new inspiration, for getting that violence back under control, innovating it out of its very persistent likelihood of spiraling into situations that will consume everything.

We're at a moment here with the people. Isaiah, as I often tell you, is a long book of prophecy more likely a collection of three books of prophecy.

So-called 1st Isaiah speaks to us from prior to the exile, that formative event in the life of ancient Israel and Judah. A once United Kingdom, brought together under the formidable reign of King David, Israel and Judah had by now come apart.

The northern kingdom, Israel, had already fallen to Babylon, had already been taken into a foreign land with foreign practices, the people but war booty and their household treasures but war booty while their land would be either claimed as Babylonian or salted to be left useless behind, nothing to return to, nothing even to imagine returning to.

Don't even think about it.

(Now that's power. When a politics can even determine what you can and can't think about, what you do and don't think about.)

The southern kingdom, Judah, was teetering, teetering. Their choice was a nasty one, whether to gin up national pride and fight back against a gathering enemy, to convince themselves even they could win against this gathering enemy that had every advantage; or whether to capitulate, do that Dr. Strangelove trick, to learn to stop worrying and love Babylon. Yes, their choice was a nasty one: nationalism, proud and violent, or imperialism, accepting the comforts of empire and turning a blind eye to its distant, though also violent, costs. That they would be cut off from their Promised Land and the Temple, that they would in effect be cut off from their Lord who gave them life, life together. That they would be cut off.

(Nationalism or imperialism? Sound familiar? You who look back on the *pax Americana* of the last century and reconsider, "Now, was that really so bad?" Or is that just me? Am I the only to have fallen into that strange love with empire?)

This, when what the Lord had wanted for the people was living in shalom, that dynamic and sustaining peace, that bush that burns but doesn't consume, being that fuels being. Hear peace not as mere stillness but mutuality, an even exchange of need and care.

So-called 2nd Isaiah speaks to us from when the worst had happened, the choice forced upon them. Babylon had come, had taken into exile the strong and the beautiful, had left behind the ugly and struggling and old and weak, had burned the city, taken down the Temple, kindling its mortar so those enormous stones could be removed from one another, a destruction that would take nearly the amount dedication and labor as building it did, and salting the land so those vineyards wouldn't even produce rotten grapes with their pervasive stink. Would produce nothing. Would always and forever produce nothing. A demolition site, you might even call it.

3rd Isaiah speaks to us from deep into the exile when the political tide had turned once again, when Babylon had met a greater foe in Assyria and Assyria was open to the people returning home. They would rebuild. They would replant, maybe even ruined soil possible to be fruitful again. They would have the Edenic moment of fresh new beginning. And there would be renewed hope that this time...

This time...

We are with Isaiah before all that had happened. We are in this moment of the Lord considering the people, in the 5th chapter of the prophetic book, before all that had happened. It was in the air. It was foreboding, coming. Things had wobbled off kilter. Things were terribly and increasingly off balance. Five hundred years into their life as a people in this land with a law that was to establish justice and a way to imagine and pursue a common good, and things had begun to career and careen.

How to understand this?

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Scripture gives us two choices. When history goes off course and fortunes turn bad, it can be understood as God withdrawing God's blessing and care, the Lord turning his countenance from upon us to away from us, withholding from us and beholding perhaps another, perhaps even Babylon, perhaps even China. Ancient Judah dared to imagine such a thing. Some of the prophets did anyway. The possibility that the Lord had favored this enormous enemy to the East, that the Lord had considered all in the creation and seen greater justice there than in his gathered and favored people.

Jeremiah dared to imagine such a thing. Through tears, through imprisonment, he dared to imagine that there was greater hope planted and growing up among foreigners than there was amidst the people who really should know better. That the Lord had removed the Lord's favor,

had found another people and place where the hope he held for people and the created order might have better odds of taking hold.

Isaiah imagined such a thing as well, though in terms not quite so bald. Here Isaiah imagines the Lord removing the hedge he'd so carefully built, making it so now the vineyard could be devoured, breaking down the wall he'd so carefully constructed, making it so now it shall all be trampled. Here Isaiah imagines the Lord active in making this once vineyard a wasteland, a dry and barren wasteland.

Elsewhere, later on in scripture, the punishing circumstances that come of injustice are less something willfully imposed and more something naturally come about. Elsewhere, later, in the letters of Paul, in the teachings of Jesus, the Lord is supposed as simply not intervening when violence threatens to consume, God as simply not rushing in from above and beyond to save us from ourselves.

For, it's supposed, we know what we must do—and when we don't do it, then herein lies our freedom. We *know* to establish justice (for only in justice is there peace), we *know* we must secure domestic tranquility (for only in tranquility can human communities thrive), we know even that there has to be some decision and intention around such things (for while they may occur in nature, they seem but rarely to occur in *human* nature); and when there's not that intention in pursuit of such dynamic, just peace, when such intention goes slack and reward comes to the powerful to seek ever more power, when peace gets chased out of town as by horse and chariot—well, here we know our own liberty, a liberty to make of a vineyard rather a graveyard.

Scripture gives us two choices for imagining what's happening when injustice takes hold and violence replaces politics: either God has withdrawn favor and is even actively punishing us or God has allowed us the freedom he's promised.

Which seems now like one of those distinctions without a difference, what to make of when favor and fortune seems to be draining out of social order? What to make of an electorate that chose Donald Trump to be president? We who used the freedom of our vote and the discernment of so much given wisdom to chose him. He whose chief policies, made known from the start, are finally having their effect, an effect of self-harm on the body politic. We have engaged in an act of self-harm. Tariffs slow the economy, funnel money upwards, and declare trade war on crucial allies like Canada; and the threat of mass deportation empties the labor market of a crucial cohort of people participating in our common life. And we're all about to feel it—all of us except for the one who's made it happen.

Setting aside the fact that when cruelty comes home to any of us, we are all of us to feel it. Setting aside the inhumanity and injustice playing out because of Trump's rhetoric and the Republicans' Big Beautiful Bill. Taking this simply in terms of politics and economy, we are all about to feel it and will for a very long time, though we might not even know this is what we're feeling. Our enormous politics, the megatrends that manifest in our lives in small, seemingly isolated ways: we might not even know it might have been otherwise.

It's so easy to think of history as inevitable. How difficult it is to see it as a series of choices, small and large, contingencies to which we freely respond, which response calls forth a corresponding response. Like here: is it that God has withdrawn favor or that we have chosen to reject that favor, to pursue instead something more of resentment and cruelty, vengeance and the threat of violence. Or is it nothing of God at all? Is it simply fate, that the United States has run its course, that the American Century has ended and it's now someone else's century to determine the terms and course of things?

That last one's the easiest one to go with. During this secular age, when God has been declared dead and all power is vested in the likes of us, it's easiest to go with fate. We're riding a fatalistic tide of history and the wisest among will keep their fingers crossed—that is, unless the levers of power are within their reach, in which case they'll make a grab for those, a self-interested, self-saving grab for those.

Otherwise, finger crossed!

But as I am standing in this pulpit, in such close proximity to the cross of Christ, which is though empty of his body because of the resurrection, I will interpret the times differently. I will tell you a different story.

When the Lord is told to have sent Adam and Eve from the garden—these two having become ill fit for it, by some mystery, a strange presence, a serpentine suggestion that they ought not listen to the God of goodness, that they ought rather to seek a truth both of good and evil—the last thing God did for this beloved but wayward pair was to sew them clothes. That they might be less vulnerable in the world, less exposed and at risk, that they might have some measure of protection, a show of care they could wear and so remember: the Lord sewed them clothes and then sent them on their way.

Has anyone ever sewn you clothes? It's a remarkably intimate thing. They have to measure your body. They have to carefully measure your body. They have to consider you deeply. They have to countenance the parts where you're especially vulnerable, especially apt to feel some shame.

They measure, they make, they provide you cover and protection. And then they send you out. On your way.

A way where the Lord would show up again and again.

A way, it must be said, I must tell you, where the Lord would show up again and again.

Don't forget, the sending out from Eden is but the beginning of the story. It happens on, like, page three of the Bible.

I don't know what happens next. In the Bible, yes, but in the living of our days, not so much. I do know, however, what we are to do. We are to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God. Conditions change. The charge remains.

Thanks be to God.