

Sermon: What Got Damaged in the Vineyard

Year C, Proper 15

[Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Isaiah is a prophet. Indeed, the book of Isaiah spans such a long period of time, decades before the fall of Israel and decades after, that we're pretty sure there was more than one author at work here. Today's reading is from the time before Jerusalem fell, when it all could have gone differently. The Isaiah we hear from today is trying to convey where the people of Israel are heading, why they're heading for disaster and what they have to focus on if they want a different outcome.

To review, prophets see under the present, not into the future. They name what the people are numb to, what is causing them grief. They articulate the yearnings of the community, especially the hopes they have learned to ignore. They don't always offer solutions, but they always offer a vision or a symbol.

So here is the Prophet Isaiah, and what does he see in the present? It's about 730 BCE. Part of Israel has already been invaded by the Assyrians, but it's not too bad. They're mostly absent and only ask for tribute to be paid. It will be another 80 years or so before Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians and Israel as an independent realm disappears for good from the face of the earth. Israel is in the middle of an increase in trade with luxury imports being paid for by agricultural exports.¹ Which means the peasant farmers, who make a living on smaller plots of land, where they grow all their own food, clothing, tools, whatever, the peasant farmers are being edged out. The grain country, the flat, well-watered lands, have already been consolidated.² At the moment, it's the hill country, where vines can grow, that is being bought up.³ Remember that a vineyard requires enormous resources, because it takes so long to get going and requires so much capital up front. Most of the wine it will produce will be sold for export. Thus a vineyard is beyond the reach of most people.

The cost of the vineyard is all up front. So imagine a vineyard, a magnificent vineyard, with everything in it you would possibly need to have an awesome harvest: cleared of stones, planted with choice vines, a watchtower to protect it, a vat for making the wine right on the premises (Isaiah 5:2), wonderful hedges and walls all around to keep out wild animals (Isaiah 5:5). Imagine that vineyard as a gift, free and clear. Someone else has paid the upfront costs, someone else has done all the upfront work to get it going. It is a magnificent gift. Literally priceless, since once a vineyard is going, so long as you tend it, it basically prints money. Here is the vision, the symbol that Isaiah is putting forward.

¹ Marvin L. Chaney, "Whose Sour Grapes?: The Addressees of Isaiah 5:1-7 in the Light of Political Economy." *Semeia* 87 (1999), 107.

² Chaney, 107.

³ Chaney, 107.

And yet, after all that work, the vineyard is producing *wild grapes* (Isaiah 5:4). A better translation is something like “rotten grapes” “putrid,⁴ stinking berries”.⁵ Isaiah asks us to hear the description of the gift that has been given as well as the horrible outcome that’s resulted and asks us to honestly answer *What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?* (Isaiah 5:4). The answer is clearly “nothing”.

Part of why we can answer so clearly is that we have all been there. We have all done something exceptional for someone and had it end in disaster. The vineyard owner asks “why?”, why did it go so wrong when it was set up to go beautifully. We understand that question because everyone who has ever been disappointed in the same way asks the same question.⁶ Why?

Isaiah describes what the vineyard owner does next. “Forget it. I did all this work and they just threw it away. I’m done. The walls can fall down and the hedges die, I’m certainly not hoeing and pruning anymore, I’m not digging out the briars and the thorns.” (Isaiah 5:5-6). And we get that too. “Cut your losses, don’t throw good money after bad, just walk away.” Right? That’s what we’d tell a friend in a similar situation. That’s what we’ve told a friend because we’ve all known someone in a similar situation.

Then Isaiah adds a twist, a twist in a way that only prophets can do. “I’m gonna tear down the walls and stop weeding and I’m gonna *command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.*” (Isaiah 5:6) Oh. Wait a minute. Who did you say that vineyard owner was again?

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! (Isaiah 5:7). God’s vineyard, so beautifully set up for us, with all the hard work already done, all the capital improvements made, God’s vineyard is producing rotten fruit because of us.

I chose this text for a Lake worship service because we would be together in the heart of God’s creation, in the middle of God’s vineyard. There is a leader in the UCC who has been arguing that if we preachers do not preach against climate change at least once a month, then in a few years all we will have left is sermons of lament. So my expectation was to go there, to talk about how urgently we need to make the changes, all the changes we can to avert the rise in global temperature. It’s going to take everything we can do as a species to keep the temperatures from rising too much. Each of us does our little bit, and then we get together and get the political leaders to enact wider ranging policy changes.

But when I went to write that sermon, the words wouldn’t come. Even though I was sweating my brains out in the cross fire of two fans. So I asked myself why the text and I couldn’t work together on the climate change message I saw in the text originally.

Because that is not Isaiah’s message. The grief Isaiah saw that we were numb to is not just about how poorly we were using the land, the gift of creation that God had given us. Isaiah saw that

⁴ David G. Garber, Jr., “Commentary on Alternate 1st Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7” from “Lectionary Commentaries for August 18, 2013: Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost”, Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=333&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 30 July 2019).

⁵ Robert L. Cate, “We Need to Be Saved (Isaiah 1:1-20, 5:1-12, 6:1-13).” *Review & Expositor* 88, no. 2 (1991): 143.

⁶ Stacey Simpson Duke, “Proper 15, Pastoral Perspective, Isaiah 5:1-7” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 342.

this frenzied drive to make the land produce as much as possible for the current generation was benefitting only the wealthy and depriving future generations of opportunity to live with God's creation as God intended. God expected justice and righteousness but saw bloodshed and heard a cry (Isaiah 5:7). Not only are we destroying God's creation, we are also destroying the reason God created it, that we might become a part of creation as it moves toward justice and righteousness.

The longing, the hope that Isaiah saw? God chose carefully where to place the vineyard. God worked hard to set up Creation in such a way that God and God's people could remain in relationship. God anticipated that the fruits of that relationship would be justice and righteousness.⁷

Have we damaged creation? Yes. Have we damaged creation in such a way to deny justice to others, to take us out of right relationship with God and each other? Given that it is the poor who bear the brunt of climate change the most, the answer must also be "yes." So is there no chance that we can restore the vineyard we have been given?

Psalms 80 (Psalm 80:8-11, 14-15, 18-19) says:

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.

Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

We can restore the vineyard we have been given. With God's grace. With God's help. But we have to get to work. We'll need all the endurance and mental toughness we can muster. We'll need all the creativity we can come up with. Because it's not just healing the earth. We have to keep in mind whose vineyard it is in the first place. Restoring creation as a part of restoring the justice God expected of us in the first place. Restoring creation as part of restoring the right relationship between us and God and us and our neighbors, restoring the righteousness God expected of us in the first place. We need to do everything we can to control global temperature rise not just because we love sitting in The Grove on a Sunday morning in the summer and we want other folks to be able to do that years from now. We need to do everything we can to control global temperature rise because that is part of how we support the relationship we have with God here in this vineyard God has planted for us.

⁷ Anatheia Portier-Young, "Commentary on Alternate 1st Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7" from "Lectionary Commentaries for August 18, 2019: Tenth Sunday after Pentecost", Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=1108&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed 30 July 2019).