

There's a vineyard, a beloved, and some angry words. What in the world is Isaiah talking about today? Let's set the scene. First, we should always remember that scripture is not being dictated; it is being remembered and repeated; it is oral tradition. We believe this first part of Isaiah was written down during the Babylonian exile but was developed almost 200 years earlier as the Assyrians conquered both parts of Israel, first the southern and then the northern kingdom often referred to as Judah or Jerusalem. We might ask: why would a prophet be so angry at the people he is prophesying to in the midst of a hostile takeover? Isn't this the time for encouragement and compassion? Shouldn't such a one be rallying the troops and lifting spirits?

If we start at the beginning of the book we see an address to the reader or listener identifying Isaiah as the son of Amoz and prophesying during the time of four kings. Why? Not only to give us the setting but to help show the reason the prophecies were needed: corruption at the highest level of government. These kings were supposed to be the stewards of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. Instead, by all accounts in various prophets and in Kings and Chronicles, the lack of justice and care for those with less was horrendous. The prophet Amos says: *You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves.* From the opening words of Isaiah: *Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.*

So here we are at beginning of a lengthy book of scripture, and we read the beautiful poem about one's beloved planting a vineyard. Wouldn't we all want to be loved enough to have someone plant a vineyard for us... But it turns quickly because this is a metaphor for the nation of Israel of course, and we hear the vintner respond in a rage for the neglect of the vineyard. In other words: I gave you everything and you scorned my generosity. So now I will tear down the walls of the vineyard and you will be on your own in a harsh and cruel world. In the analogy, this would be the Assyrians. Tending the vineyard, appreciating the gift, means caring for all of the grapes, even the poor ones. Isaiah's argument throughout the work is that because of Israel's unjust ways which have sorely wounded God's own children, they have been abandoned by God and left to a cold, cruel world. But if they would only turn from their ways, God's grace would flourish among them and they would be safe and happy once again. In other words, they cannot be destroyed from without but only from within, by their own greed and injustice.

Jesus repeats this idea this morning by employing the well-used analogy of a vineyard. This time, it can be interpreted as the promise originally to God's special people being opened to all who accept it in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, who calls us to repentance and shows us the way, can be accepted or rejected. To those who accept this invitation, life awaits but to those who reject it, only death. Much like Isaiah, the listeners are left with a choice and the hope is that they will choose life. I like to think of this in the same way I think of the laws of physics. We are born into a reality and must work within its parameters. Yes, we discover the limits of these parameters more and more each day and we revise our thinking based on our discoveries, but we acknowledge the parameters exist. So that if I am riding my bicycle and take a sharp turn, I can expect an accident. And so on. Ethically there is a kind of physics as well.

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In scripture, when it talks about injustice, we are violating the laws of ethical physics. Some among us who are ethical speed demons have no concern for consequences and leave a tragic scene in our wake. Maybe it's a broken family or on a larger scale, a broken economy. So that when we read in scripture these sentiments that in the end, God is going to get us, this ought to be obvious before we even read the passage. Prophets are people who, through careful observation of the world or society, see how we defy the moral laws of God and have a negative impact on those around us and ourselves. So, yes, God gets us when we behave unjustly in much the same way we take a spill when we go too quickly around a turn. It's built into the system and we acknowledge God as the creator of the system.

Jesus wants us to live within the system and flourish so we can experience God's love here and now in all that we see and do. Nature, creativity, good food, fun activities, and above all, in the way we relate with each other. It is certain doom if we do not, however, and we are experiencing this here and now. Through simple observation we can see that our excessive desire for goods is killing Mother Nature. Our desire to make a quick buck is widening the wealth gap and making the poor even poorer. The need to live as some desire at the expense of others is corrupting our government. If Isaiah were alive today, what would be his prophecy? If Jesus returned tomorrow could we look him in the eye? We might in other words ask: have we made Jesus Christ the chief cornerstone of our lives, or has he been rejected?

Certainly, good church folk would never intentionally reject Jesus Christ. But it takes practice to continually accept him. This practice requires prayer and service. At St. Mark's we pray regularly together and now we might consider how to be of service. I am calling on us to form a social action committee and I am asking that we take this seriously enough to fund it, starting at \$5,000 this year. What will be the purpose? To prayerfully consider together what might be needed in this neighborhood or in this land to more fully live into the vision God has for us as a human race. And then to act. I will tell you the story of one young man in our church who is already doing this. Mateu Healy, a high school senior approached me to see about organizing a group to help those with less, rebuild their homes. Housing is a serious issue and this young man wants to tackle it. This is a good beginning. This is God's love in action and I promise to join his efforts. Will you? And then what? Some guy at my brother's church is buying an old motel to house the homeless. We aren't going to let my brother's church outdo us are we...

Then we might consider what else needs doing. As children of God we come together in prayer and in service so we don't have to worry about Isaiah's admonition: why should I care about your sacrifices and festivals; I care about how you treat the poor. Prayer AND service. Jesus says earlier in Matthew's gospel that we are to be a city on a hill that doesn't hide our light. This is no time for polite company. This is no time to wait until the right time. This is the right time. The Kingdom of God has come near. Now is the time to shine our light.

We are smart enough to work together in a pandemic and stay safe. We are smart enough to understand the issues and know how to tackle them. We are strong enough to get things done and above all we are loving enough to care that they get done. Let's take this cornerstone and use it as the foundation of something we build; something wonderful, and good, and holy.