

Choose Hope

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, August 14, 2022.

Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5

This morning's reading from Isaiah may be a little difficult to follow upon first hearing, because the point of view keeps changing. Rather than a single narrative from one perspective, it is more like a play with three different characters, each delivering their respective lines.

Imagine the scene: a vineyard in wine country, a hillside with row upon row of grape vines, bordered by a stone wall and a green hedge. The first character comes on stage, offering to sing a love song:

"Let me 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 wild grapes."

Clearly, the owner of the vineyard had gone to great lengths to make sure that the vines he planted would bear good fruit. He chose a site on a hillside with very fertile soil. He cleared the land of stones and cultivated the soil. He selected only choice vines to be planted. He built a stone wall to keep livestock out. And he also planted a hedge to shelter the vines from the wind. It was a labor of love. Given everything he had done to plan and care for his vineyard, he had great expectations of a bountiful harvest. But much to his dismay, his vineyard yielded only wild grapes.

The Hebrew word used here for "wild grapes" is the same word used to describe decaying fish. So, not only were these grapes useless, unfit for human consumption, they were rotten and had a foul stench. You might call them stink berries instead of wild grapes -- offensive to the smell, noxious, maybe even poisonous.

The disappointed vineyard owner is next to come on stage. He addresses us -- the audience -- directly:

“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 wild grapes?”

We are asked to stand in judgment on the unproductive vineyard. Like a jury in a courtroom, we are asked to decide whether the owner of the vineyard or the vineyard itself was at fault. Was there anything more the owner of the vineyard could have done? No, we say to ourselves, there was nothing more he could have done.

The vineyard owner continues: “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 waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns.” Like a spurned lover, the vineyard owner lashes out, laying waste to the vineyard and leaving it behind. After all the time and effort he had devoted to it, after all the love and care he had lavished upon it, he was left with nothing but sour grapes. A vineyard that yields sour grapes is worthless. He abandons it.

But then the owner of the vineyard goes even further, saying “I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.” And our jaws drop to the floor in surprise. Did he just say that he’s going to bring a drought upon the land? We suddenly realize that this is no ordinary vineyard owner! No human can command the clouds! Only God can do that! No human can control the rain! Only the Lord, God of Israel, is capable of such a thing! This vineyard owner is no lowly Judean. This vineyard owner is none other than God Almighty!

Startled by this revelation, we try to catch our collective breath as a third character walks on stage. It is the prophet Isaiah. He steps forward to pronounce God’s judgment upon the nation: “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are God’s pleasant planting; God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

We are stunned! All along, we thought the play was about a vineyard that produced bad fruit. And now we realize that it was not about a vineyard at all! It was about two nations—the Northern Kingdom of

Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah—which had not produced the good fruits of justice and righteousness that God had expected of them.

When they were attacked by Assyria, the people of Israel and Judah interpreted it as God’s judgment against them. In the eighth century, Assyria, the dominant military power and the most feared nation in the Near East, attacked the Northern Kingdom of Israel, deporting portions of its population, and destroying many of its cities. Assyria also took control of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, making it a vassal state of the Assyrian empire. Like the vineyard that produced bad fruit, Israel and Judah were “devoured,” “trampled down,” made “a waste.”

This passage from Isaiah doesn’t spell out what injustice is or what justice should be. But from what is written earlier in the book of Isaiah, we can easily see the types of injustices in which the people had engaged: they did not defend the cause of the widow and the orphan, they oppressed the poor, they coveted and stored up wealth for themselves, they acquitted the guilty and deprived the innocent of their rights. Sound familiar? We see such social and economic injustice in far too many countries today, including our own.

Like the landowner who cared for his vineyard, God created us and sustains us. God cares for us and nurtures us. And God has great expectations of us. God expects us to bear good fruit. God expects us to do justice, but instead God sees violence and bloodshed. God expects righteousness from us, but instead God hears cries of pain and suffering.

I have to admit that over the past few years I have felt despair over the state of our nation and the state of the world. The coronavirus pandemic, the catastrophic effects of climate change, the tragedy of gun violence, the persistence of racism and white supremacy, growing inequality in wealth and income, the rise of Christian nationalism, deepening political divisions, the threats to our democracy, the attack on women’s reproductive rights, have weighed heavy on my heart. Amidst the violence and bloodshed in our world, amidst all the pain and suffering, I have struggled to hang on to hope.

So I am grateful that Isaiah does eventually offer a word of hope. In chapter 11, Isaiah lifts up the image of a tree stump, a symbol of utter death and destruction, out of which new life begins to grow. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, (Jesse was King David's father) and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Isaiah offers a vision of a new king who will come from King David's family line, a new king with God-given gifts for leadership: intellectual power, moral might, and deep religious faith. "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." This king will rule with justice and righteousness, and will establish a new era of peace and harmony.

In the Christian tradition, this passage has been interpreted as pointing to the birth of Jesus, the Christ. But that was not what Isaiah understood himself to be doing. He was not predicting the birth of the Messiah in some distant future. Rather, Isaiah had in mind a king who would live and reign in the immediate future, in Isaiah's own time.

Isaiah's prophetic vision gave hope to the people of Israel and Judah. God had not abandoned them, and God has not abandoned us. With all that is going wrong in our country and in the world, God is still present with us. Through all our trials and tribulations, God watches over us. No matter what difficulties we face, God looks out for us.

If solving the world's problems were entirely up to human beings, I don't think I could hold onto hope. Left to our own devices, we humans all too often make a mess of things. It is only with God in the picture that I find cause to hope, because God helps us to see beyond our own self-serving schemes and parochial points of view to seek the common good of all, keeping the whole world in mind.

When we put our trust in God, we can have confidence that whatever happens to us, God will always be by our side, offering us love and care. God will never let us down, and God will never let us go. Thanks be to God. Amen.