

Reign of Christ (Isaiah 5:1-7, 11:1-5) ***What Kind of King Does God Promise?***

The two selections for Isaiah for today may seem rather divergent. In Isaiah 5, God is pictured as a gardener - a vine dresser - and the Southern Kingdom of Judah is pictured as wild grapes. In Isaiah 11, we have the promise of the coming Messiah - the perfect king. Isaiah's ministry was in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Isaiah 5, the first part of the reading, is known as the "Song of the Vineyard" and is considered one of the finest literary pieces in the Old Testament. It is a carefully crafted allegory, a relatively rare literary form in the Old Testament that used symbolic figures, characters, or actions to illustrate a truth or observation about human experience. An allegory usually involves a short story in which different elements represent different aspects of the truth to be illustrated.

Allegorical reading of much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was a common practice in the Early Church, and still prevails in some circles. In all biblical occurrences of allegory, the meaning of the story is clearly explained within the context of the biblical text.

The images used in today's allegory were all taken from common practices of raising grapes in the Ancient Middle east, many of which are still in use today. In the hill country of Israel, grapes were often grown on hillsides terraced by retaining walls and backfilled with fertile soil. On more level ground, the hard earth was plowed or dug and numerous stones that are a common part of the Near Eastern landscape were removed and used in walls around the fields or to build a watchtower in the middle of the field.

Since grapes were a staple food, used both for wine and preserved as raisins for use throughout the year, the grape harvest was extremely important and needed to be protected from animals, birds, and even theft. During the grape harvest, the vineyard owner or men hired for the job, would man the watchtower to protect the vineyard.

The singer emphasized that only “choice vines” were planted. This would refer to cultured stock that would produce wine-quality grapes with small seeds and juice with a high sugar content. Wild grapes produce only small fruit with large seeds and are often sour. The origin of the Hebrew term translated “wild grapes” can be traced to a root word that means “bitter.”

All these images intend to portray the time and energy the vineyard owner had invested in this vineyard. There is a clear sense that there is some expectation of return on this investment. Any farming involves both confidence and patience to justify the cost and effort. There must be confidence in the future outcome that allows the farmer to invest resources with no guarantee of any return beyond the expectation that the crop will produce fruit. And there must be patience since there is often a span of months or even years between the original planting and the harvest, especially with crops like grapes or olives, where full production would not begin for several years.

So, not only does the emphasis fall on the time and energy invested, the patience of the vineyard owner and his confidence of a good harvest are also part of this story. The prophet Isaiah begins by singing a love-song concerning his beloved's, that is God's, vineyard. Isaiah gained the attention of his listening audience as he began to sing his love-song.

After all, it isn't very often that we hear a prophet sing not only a song, but a love-song. The people who listened to Isaiah's song probably expected to hear a ballad with a happy ending. However, they were in for a big surprise!

Isaiah sings of how God, his beloved did everything possible to set up a healthy, thriving vineyard. The soil was fertile and cultivated; the stones were removed; only the finest quality vines were planted; a watchtower was built in the middle of vineyard; and a wine vat was built in preparation for the harvesting and processing of the grapes. So far, so good. This love-song is pleasant to the ears, and listeners' heartstrings are touched by the nurturing care of the beloved. What a wonderful love-song this prophet Isaiah is serenading us with.

But, wait, before you are lulled into a false sense of euphoria with these tender words, listen to what follows. Surprise, surprise! Isaiah's love-song is transformed into a song of hard-hitting judgement and lament. Maybe we can gain the sense of this unpleasant surprise by thinking of the love-song as a gentle, bedtime lullaby which is transformed into a condemning, raunchy, deafening heavy-metal rock-and-roll song.

The irony of the song comes to the forefront when Isaiah, now speaking for God, asks the people of Jerusalem and Judah to "judge between me - that is God - and my vineyard - that is the people of Jerusalem and Judah." In an agonising song of judgement and lament, God tells his people that there was nothing more he could do to guarantee the success of his vineyard. He had done everything that he could do. This reminds us of the solemn reproaches we use on Good Friday.

Implied here in the song is the human freedom that God gives us. In the song, God the beloved expects the best from his people: “he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” So, the consequences of freedom being misused or abused is that a well cared for vineyard becomes neglected and turns into a dried-out wasteland of brier and thorns.

The owner himself spoke to the audience, with rhetorical questions that draw them into the story. Familiar with the process of vineyard culture, they would quickly have agreed that not only had the owner done everything he could have done to achieve the expected result, something needed to be done to the vineyard, if for no other reason than to put the fertile land to better use.

There is a degree of pathos in the questions. After all, what parent of a wayward child has not asked the same questions? What more could I have done? Why did they turn out this way? One can almost picture Isaiah’s audience shaking their heads in sadness and disbelief that such well intentioned efforts should produce such miserable results.

Rather than tear up and destroy the vines, the owner simply removed his care and protection of the vineyard. He removed the protecting wall, allowing the animals to have free run of the vineyard, not only allowing them to eat the fruit but also putting the plants themselves at risk of damage. He would no longer prune or weed, resulting in stunted and sickly plants.

While we often tend to conceptualize “judgment’ of God in terms of active punishment, it is important to note that here it is conceptualized

simply as the absence of God's sustaining presence. God will simply allow the vineyard to take its natural course without intervention, without doing anything to shape it for a better purpose. This is a crucial point in the story.

If the audience had been amused by this song so far, they would quickly begin to realize that something more important than an unproductive vineyard is at stake here. The owner finally said that he would withhold rain from the vineyard. It would quickly dawn on them that only God can withhold rain. In the arid Middle East, rain was understood to be the very life of the land. The hot desert wind, especially in the absence of rain, became a metaphor for the judgment of God against sin and unrighteousness. Lack of rain was often interpreted as a warning from God.

The climax of the story or song comes quickly, almost as a slap in the face as the prophet explains the allegory. The people of Israel simply have not met God's expectations. He had heard their cries as slaves oppressed in Egypt, had taken them out of slavery, and promised that he would be with them, that he would be their God and that they would be his people. Faithful to his promises, he had created them as a people, had brought them into the land, fought for them as they settled into the land, and then guided them with his presence through judges, prophets, kings, and priests.

God's creation of people was not simply that he might have someone to worship him. It was not so that they might exist in the world as a privileged nation of pampered people, no more than the vineyard owner planned the vineyard simply to have pampered plants. They existed in

the world because God had chosen them to be a blessing to the world. They had a purpose in the world. God had revealed himself to them so they might respond to that revelation, live in the world as God's people, and in so doing the other nations and peoples might come to see and know and understand Israel's God.

Following the metaphor in this allegory, they were to produce fruit. Here, we need to be careful that we do not read New Testament or evangelical Christian ideas back into this text. The fruit they were to produce was not a harvest of saved "souls" as some might tend to think. The fruit they were to produce was to fulfill their calling in the world as God's people by doing *torah*, that is by following God's instructions for how to live as God's people in God's world as echoed in Micah's famous verse: "...O people, the Lord has already told you what is good and this is what he requires: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." And later Jesus, when asked a similar question answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength..... You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Jesus summarized the Old Testament concepts of righteousness and justice found in Isaiah. Righteousness is what is owed to God because he is God, because he has revealed himself as God, because he has called these people into existence as his people. Here righteousness is not a moral category of perfection, but living a life that acknowledges that God is indeed God. It is a response of faithfulness that is willing to accept the responsibility of being God's people. It is a relationship in which the people "love the Lord" totally and completely.

As a result, the people would practice justice. Here justice is not a legal category, but is a way to talk about equality and fairness arising from a concern for others that is willing to place human need and relationship as the highest priority of life flowing from relationship with God. In the fullest sense, to “do justice” is the same thing as loving one’s neighbour as oneself.

The point is that, just like the vineyard, Israel has not lived up to God’s expectation even after God has given them every opportunity to produce fruit. Called to be righteous and to do justice as God’s people they had failed, and the harvest was bitter.

The problem that Isaiah finds in the Southern Kingdom is the same as Hosea found in the Northern Kingdom. The people are estranged from God. Some of the people have started to worship idols and false gods. The idea of loving God with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength is foreign to them. Others continue to worship God at the temple and go through religious rituals, but don’t allow their religion to affect their daily lives. These people are wrapped up in themselves. They live unjust and uncaring lives as they ignore the poor and needy.

Yet, Isaiah promises that change will come as he describes the perfect king - the Messiah. The king will be a sprout from the root of Jesse who was the father of David. In other words, he will be a descendent of King David and the fulfillment of God’s promise that David’s family would rule.

The Spirit descends upon the stump and gives him the characteristics that will make him a righteous king. This sprout of Jesse doesn’t have these qualities in and of himself. They are gifts of the Holy Spirit. They

are the gifts of wisdom and understanding, council and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. These are the words of blessing that are put upon the newly baptized and those who are affirming their baptism.

We are taken from the vineyard of life as wild grapes. The Spirit of God then comes upon us, as the Spirit did with the sprout from Jesse's stump, and begins the Spirit's work within us. The transformation process from wild grapes to Spirit-filled is long and sometimes painful. The Spirit might lead us to step out of our comfort zone - to walk new paths and learn new things. Our attitude towards certain groups may be changed when we meet and become acquainted with one or two members of those groups, such as Muslims, LGBTQ+ persons, refugees, our Indigenous neighbours. The Spirit might convict us of the harmful effects that our words and attitudes have upon others and might convince us that change is needed.

The changes that occur in the king of kings and in the followers of the king, allow transformation to take place in the world. No longer are words and actions based on outward appearances. Our first impressions of others, especially those who are different from ourselves, usually stress the differences. Seeing beyond outward appearances allows us to recognize similarities. Similarities facilitate the building of relationships. Justice and equality will be hallmarks of the transformed world.

As the transformation process begins, as disciples of Jesus, we start to include the disenfranchised, to raise up those who have been beaten down, and to seek justice for all who have been treated inhumanly or unfairly. At the same time, we strive for equity where the poor and needy have enough and the rich and powerful do not have too much.

Disciples of Jesus who live this way are seen as righteous (not self-righteous) people of integrity and authentic individuals. There is also a faithfulness in these disciples. They are consistent in their service and strong in their convictions under the reign of Christ. We live in a broken world. Certainly the events of the past weeks and months have demonstrated this fact.

The world will not change with the defeat of Hamas or the invading Russians, or hate-filled angry people. Nor will it necessarily be a better place if democracy prevails, capitalism is accepted by all and McDonald's and Wal-Mart are able to expand into more countries. The world will only change when people change and that is the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is upon us so that we might be changed and in turn share God's love and grace and change the world.

To quote a contemporary Isaiah, Noble Peace Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel: "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free. How can we not be sensitive to their plight? Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere. There is so much to be done, there is so much that can be done."

Just one person - a Raoul Wallenberg, an Albert Schweitzer, a Martin Luther King, Jr - one person of integrity can make a difference, a difference of life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that

when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.”

As members of the King’s kingdom, as members of Christ the Vine, we are his branches. May his gifts of grace mobilize us to bear fruit by caring for the lost, the least, and the last among us and in every land.

Amen.

Prayers of the People Pentecost 26 November 26 2023

As the shepherd who cares for the flock, loving God, you guide all things through Jesus whom you have exalted over all Creation as king. Hear the prayers we offer in his name for the Creation he cherished and that you entrust to us.

For the Church: that we may continue Jesus' ministry of healing and reconciliation by reaching out to all who feel alienated, forgotten or marginalised.

For the grace of forgiveness: that we may be moved to forgive all who have injured us and show concern and compassion for them.

For greater integrity: that we may both speak and live the virtues that are planted deep within our hearts so that we may be authentic witnesses to God's reign and welcome a continuous transformation of our hearts to grow to be more like Jesus.

For each of us: that we may live our lives fearlessly while recognizing that God's promise is to be welcomed into paradise by Christ. As has been given to us that we show mercy and grace to others in our lifelong journey of discipleship: that we may willingly use our strength, talents, time and energy in the service of Christ in the world.

For the leaders of all nations: that they may be guided by God's wisdom in ensuring and promoting the well-being of all members of society, in protecting the powerless, and in promoting justice, and abundant life for all.

For those who hunger and thirst, and are wounded and hurt by war, especially those in Ukraine and Gaza. We are grateful for the temporary cease of guns and peace in Gaza, the release of the captives, especially children, and the delivery of food, water, fuel for generators and oil for stoves. May this temporary peace lead to permanent peace.

For Doctors Without Borders and all medical personnel treating patients for severe burns at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, in the Gaza Strip, following an Israeli airstrike close to the hospital. We pray for adequate medical supplies and safety for the injured or maimed. We pray for the safety of expectant mothers and children requiring medical care. We give thanks for health care professionals willing to work and care for patients under these brutal conditions.

For Bishops Susan and Kathy, pastors, deacons, lay leaders, and volunteers, as they serve you and your people with compassion and love. We pray for Peace Lutheran in Abbotsford and Pr. Dean Andersen and Emmaus Lutheran in Burnaby and Pr. Timo Saarinen. Guide them with love and support.

For all who struggle with life's demands: the poor, those living without secure shelter, the lonely, those who are housebound, and those with mental and physical pain or illness. We pray especially for (*naming of people silently or aloud...*) that God will sustain them and surround them with compassionate and supportive friends, neighbours, and family members.

For all who are grieving and for all who are approaching death: that they may entrust themselves into God's loving embrace and be healed of all their afflictions; and for all who have died: that Christ may welcome them into the fullness of life where sorrow and pain exist no more.

Look upon your people who rejoice in your justice and mercy, and grant that the prayers we make may reveal Christ's reign in our time. **Amen**

God in Community, make us all one Body, as we pray.

Our Father ...