

THE SONG OF THE VINEYARD

Isaiah 5:1-7

A sermon by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

SCRIPTURE

*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 watch-tower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild 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 wild 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 waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briers 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 pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!*

When I reopened the passage before us today – after several months of letting it sit – I was distressed to be ending this series on prophets on such a hopeless note. “God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” I am about to go off to Swan’s Island, Maine, for what will hopefully be my most peaceful couple of weeks, and I hate to leave you with this passage of human failure and divine despair.

But I had selected the passage and remain committed to it, so I sought a redemptive way to express what Isaiah is expressing here early in the book that bears his name: the condition into which we humans have managed to live our lives after the Fall, whether we be the people of Israel and Judah over whom God was lamenting in the eighth century BC, or 21st century Americans with all our anxieties, perplexities, divisions, heartache, and outbursts of violence.

I.

Isaiah’s passage led me to recall several more tender, though no less accurate, descriptions of our condition. What came to mind were the opening words from a preface of Nathanael Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, set in the Puritan days as our own nation took shape. I often use these words in my Old Testament classes to introduce the beautiful book of Ruth. Hear Hawthorne:

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a *cemetery*, and another portion as the site of a *prison*...

Like all that pertains to crime, [the prison] seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early born *the black flower of civilized society*, a prison.¹

Hawthorne recognized that even in the earliest days of our nation – armed with whatever “Utopia of human virtue and happiness ...[they] projected” – our forebearers recognized the tragic but inevitable need for both a *prison* and a *cemetery*. The consequences of the Fall.

**

For several reasons of pastoral care, I’ve been more acutely aware recently of both the beauty of the long lives we live but also the challenges of aging with its inevitable toll on body and mind which nearly all of us who live out our days until their natural end experience. From the last chapter of Ecclesiastes:

Remember your creator in the days of your youth
[says the Preacher/Teacher who is its author]

before the days of trouble come
[or in one translation “the evil days”]
and the years draw near when you will say,
‘I have no pleasure in them’...

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Chapter 1, “The Prison Door” (originally published in 1850).

What follows from the pen of this gifted writer are image upon image of *aging*:

*before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars
are darkened and the clouds [rather than sunshine]
return with the rain;*

*on the day...when...one rises up
at [even] the sound of a bird
[and remains unable to return to sleep] ...*

*when one is afraid of heights,
and terrors are in the road;*

[when] the almond tree blossoms,

[when] the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails...

Then follow images of the end of life:

*before the silver cord is snapped,
and the golden bowl is broken,
and the pitcher is broken at the fountain,
and the wheel broken at the cistern,
and the dust returns to the earth as it was,
and the breath returns to God who gave it.*

One of my best friends all my adult life is a physician who has spent most of his working life in the field of nephrology and the treatment of those hoping for and awaiting kidney transplants. I will never forget several years ago when he said: "I learned early on in medical school that the story of our bodies is a story of slow decline." Yet he remains one of the most hopeful and stalwart Christians I know. "The end of the matter; all has been heard," says Ecclesiastes. "Fear God, and keep his commandments."²

**

After sitting with Hawthorne and Ecclesiastes I reached for the bottom shelf in my office for a tome of a book Rabbi Jack Moline must have spent an entire paycheck to give me as a gift a decade ago. It is a collection of ancient Jewish meditations on scripture entitled "Legends from the Talmud and Midrash."³ In a section called "Sundry Matters," the following appears:

*Ever since pleasure seekers have multiplied,
justice has come to be subverted,
human conduct has deteriorated,
and God has no satisfaction with the world.*

² Ecclesiastes 12:13.

³ Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitsky, ed., *The Book of Legends Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 815:87.

*Even since they who display
partiality in judgment have multiplied...
people have thrown off the yoke of Heaven
and have placed upon themselves the yoke of judgment...*

*Ever since [people of whom it is said],
“Their heart goeth after their gain”⁴... have multiplied,
they “who call evil good and good evil”⁵...have also multiplied
[and] cries of “woe” have increased in the world.*

*Ever since...the arrogant have increased,
disciples have become few,
and Torah has had to go about looking for people to study it.*

*Even since [people]
who make much of their outward appearance have multiplied,
the [children] of Israel have begun to marry such [people],
because our generation looks only to the outward appearance...*

*Ever since the [parsimonious] have multiplied,
despoilers of the poor have also multiplied,
and so have those who harden their hearts
and close their hands from lending to the needy...*

In his unmatched style, Jack calls these sayings a “collection of crankyisms.”⁶

II.

Hawthorne, Ecclesiastes, this collection – all prepare the way for us to hear Isaiah in context: in *context* of the *repeating disappointment* God experiences at the hands of the people God has created and called. Isaiah describes his own disappointment at the disappointment God has experienced:

*My beloved [my God] 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 watch-tower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes...*

*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;*

⁴ Ezekiel 33:31.

⁵ Isaiah 5:20.

⁶ Email to me August 11, 2022.

*[God] expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!*

III.

But the sadness on the part of God all of these passages from all of these writers depict is not the final word. The neglect of justice in favor of bloodshed and righteousness in favor of cries of pain not the end of the story which even Isaiah – in all his honesty – chooses to leave us.

In the very next chapter, God *calls* Isaiah to be a prophet:

“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

And Isaiah answers:

“Here am I; send me!”⁷

A few chapters beyond Isaiah’s willingness to be *sent* by God lies the second section of the book, which opens:

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.⁸*

Followed by:

*A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’⁹*

⁷ Isaiah 6:1-8.

⁸ Isaiah 40:1-2.

⁹ Isaiah 40:3-5.

Then near the end of the Book of Isaiah lies a passage with which I end so many worship services:

*For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.¹⁰*

III.

Hope is built into the book of Isaiah. Redemption is built into the book. That is why Handel wrote his music that we sing at both Easter and Christmas. That is why the Jewish people have venerated this book. That is why New Testament writers have quoted it more than any other Old Testament book they inherited, second only to the Psalms.¹¹

These New Testament writers remembered one phrase from Isaiah that is a passageway into Christian faith and became their reason for being and the subject of their writing:

*Therefore [says Isaiah]
The Lord himself shall give you a sign;
Behold, a virgin shall conceive,
And bear a son,
And shall call his name Immanuel – “God with us.”¹²*

As Hawthorne describes the bleakness of the prison yard in the Utopian Colony, he concludes with these words:

...rooted almost at the threshold [of the prison], was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him.¹³

...Finding [the rose-bush, Hawthorne continues] ...we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader.

[The rose] may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

My friends, the one we say was “born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate” is that “sweet moral blossom.” Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ relieves, redeems – even rectifies – the tale of human frailty and sorrow” we know so well.

¹⁰ Isaiah 55:12-13.

¹¹ <https://www.knowableword.com/2013/03/20/top-10-ot-books-quoted-in-nt/>. Brevard Childs makes this same claim.

¹² Isaiah 7:14.

¹³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Chapter 1, “The Prison Door” (originally published in 1850).

Accept Christ.
Follow Christ.
Commit to Christ.
Worship Christ.
Renew your membership
Within the community of Christ,
Which is the Church.

Partake of our common meal
Which Christ sets before us as host:
Bread and wine,
Body and blood.
The flower plucked from the rose bush is “given for you.”
“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Amen.