

“Jukebox”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-9

November 17, 2019 - Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Last week we heard from the prophet Hosea who lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel just as it was about to fall to the Assyrian empire in the late 8th Century BCE. Today we meet one of the most beloved prophets for both Jews and Christians — Isaiah. We love Isaiah because while he does the prophetic task of calling out injustice, he also offers lovely, hopeful words.

Scholars believe that the book of Isaiah is made up of the prophecies of possibly three different people. This morning we’re hearing from First Isaiah, who was writing around the same time as Hosea, but in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He is watching the North fall and can see that the South is on the road to ruin as well. We’ve got two passages — one a judgment oracle and the next a very well-known promise of salvation that we will hear again in just a few weeks during Advent.

The tone of these two passages is so different that it’s hard to believe they’re just six chapters apart. But before we hear them, I want to focus on the complexity of the first passage — Isaiah’s vineyard song.

It begins as a traditional song for the wine harvest. We know that there were other love songs like this one, in which a woman is singing about her beloved and comparing herself to a vineyard and describing the way her lover tended the vineyard, and in Hebrew it’s more than a bit suggestive.

But the love song, having drawn you in to romance, takes a very abrupt turn. Listen for it! And then we’ll throw another quarter in the jukebox and get that very hope-filled anthem.

Oh, one more thing. I can’t do justice to the passion at the beginning of this song, but I want us to try to recapture some of the wordplay that happens toward the end and is lost in translation. So I’ll pause and include some Hebrew so you can hear just what Isaiah is up to.

Listen for God’s Word to us from chapter 5 of the book of the prophet Isaiah:

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.

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 briars 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 *mishpat* — justice,
but instead saw *mishpakh* — bloodshed;
[he expected] *tsedaqah* — righteousness,
but instead heard *tse'aqah* — a cry!

And continuing in chapter 11:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
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.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

This is the Word of the LORD. Thanks be to God.

I had a vineyard, and its grapes went sour. So I let it go, to Babylonian power.

Harland Howard was the first to say that a country song is “three chords and the truth.” Isaiah lures the listener in with the saucy vineyard torch singer and you’re there for a couple of verses before you say, “Wait a second, this isn’t a woman!” and then “Wait a second, this isn’t a love song!” But Isaiah’s already got your ear, and he is ready to tell you the truth.

It actually reminds me more of a particular folk song. We all know the first verse to Woody Guthrie’s *This Land is Your Land* about the Redwood Forest and the Gulf Stream waters. And I remember singing the second verse in school, about the endless skyway and the golden valley. More rarely do we hear some of the other original verses:

*As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.*

*In the squares of the city, In the shadow of a steeple;
By the relief office, I'd seen my people.*

*As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking,
Is this land made for you and me?*

Like Woody Guthrie, Isaiah gives a song that possesses deep love, but turns to disappointment. What's God so upset about? The rest of chapter 5 tells of poor farmers being displaced, leading to hunger and homelessness. We can read about decadence, greed, conspicuous consumption, corruption in leadership and manipulation of the legal system.¹ Wow, those folks from 2,700 years ago really had their priorities messed up.

The song that changes mid-stream mirrors how God was hoping for one outcome — justice and righteousness — and got the horrible rhymes of bloodshed and crying instead. You can't always get what you want.

God's reaction in the song is not to destroy the vineyard, but to let it fend for itself and bring about its own destruction. God will remove the protections and the tender care and so the vineyard will be trampled and become overgrown and, left to its own devices, the whole place will fall apart. As the prophet sees it, the people have egregiously abused God's covenant with them, they've not kept their end of the deal, and God has every right to leave them to figure out how to survive.

With dusk arriving so early and winter chill elbowing its way in, I have gone a couple of minutes out of my way while heading home the past two weeks to spot some brilliant oranges and reds on the trees of some of our neighbors. With the world filled with sad and maddening news, I need a peek at natural beauty, even if it's the color that comes just before the end. I was both delighted and a bit melancholy when I arrived at the church the other day to see that the two ginkgo trees out front dropped all their leaves overnight, like they magically decided to shrug off their golden pashminas on the count of three.²

The God that Isaiah knows will not leave us in a wasteland of dead vines and stumps. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

Just before we bought our house, the previous owners had to have a massive old pine tree cut down. We pondered what we could do with the stump for awhile. The next spring, a teeny tree started up from one of the stump's gnarled roots. It was going to make its move while we pondered. We have planted dozens of trees in our yard, but we weren't sure we wanted one right there. So I clipped it off and imagined I'd go out and do that every spring.

Life is relentless. I am not relentless. That tree-borne-of-our-stump is now just over ten feet tall.

The Reverend Eugene Peterson was a Presbyterian minister who did a whole lot of pastoring and writing but is best known for his very own Bible translation called *The Message*, which sought to use more

¹"Stump vs Spirit" by Walter Brueggemann in *Texts for Preaching, Year A*.

² With thanks for this imagery to an old friend, the Rev. Joe Cherry

modern and accessible language. When Peterson died last year, his son Leif read a poem at the funeral that he'd written for his dad:

It's almost laughable
how you fooled them.
How for thirty years, every week
you made them think
you were saying something new...
Only my inheritance keeps me
from giving you away.
Because I alone know your secret.
I alone know what you've been doing...
Because for fifty years you've
been telling me the secret. For fifty
years you've stealed into my room
at night and whispered softly to my
sleeping head. It's the same message
over and over and you don't vary
it one bit.
God loves you.
He's on your side.
He's coming after you.
He's relentless.³

Isaiah knew this relentless God. This God who could not leave the land in desolation, but would send one from the line of David to bring new life in justice and righteousness as all creation is fundamentally transformed. God would push through dead wood and craggy rock and concrete. God would push through war and corruption and yet another school shooting that we can't even find a way to talk about. God would push through hard heads and hearts of stone.

The song of disappointment that ends in desolation needs to be on the playlist because God is relentless in reminding us that judgment is for God alone and there is nothing holy about amassing wealth at the expense of the vulnerable and nothing righteous about the status quo.

But this God that Isaiah knows and sings about cannot remain unplugged. It's not in God's nature. The pull of God toward the people of God is relentless. And so out of despair and rot rises a green blade that will push and push and push. And you know the cycle — all of this has happened before, all of this will happen again. We'll try to cut it down. But God will not give up.

We'll get to Advent and we'll be all over the shoot from the stump that brings wisdom and understanding

³ "A Eulogy for the Celebration of the Resurrection of Eugene Peterson" published as the Commemorative Preface to *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* by Eugene Peterson, 2019.

and righteousness being the incarnation of Jesus. For now, look for the shoots. Look for the colorful things emerging from the gray death. Look for the brave souls who stand in the breach between the people and justice. Look for the relentless stretch toward the sun that begins underground.

“...and a little child shall lead them.” Yes, the Christ child, of course. But we ignore the children trying to lead us at our own peril. If we tell them they don’t understand the complexity of the world or that their dream of a world without school lockdown drills or a world that isn’t being poisoned or a world where we look at the content of a person’s character and not their gender or orientation is folly, well we’ll hear the sound of Isaiah shuffling through the sheet music to find that one about the vineyard.

Look for the song that seems to emerge from nowhere in particular but reveals itself to be ancient and tuned to your pulse and rooted in relentless hope. This melody is meant for you. Whether your voice is full or shaky, you are expected to sing along. So it is with the Spirit of God. Amen.