

## The Awakened Traveler: Replanting

### Isaiah 5:1-7

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It may be that some of you are very excited for Nancy to return and preach on something that is not the gloomy aspects of ancient prophets.

Last week, Isaiah fumed against those who were worshipping with hearts full of greed and apathy toward the people being crushed by the systems of the wealthy and the powerful. This week, Isaiah makes his ire broader; it is not just the powerful who have fallen away from righteousness, not just the wealthy whose hearts have turned from God. It is all of Israel. Despite all of God's hard work, they are only producing wild grapes—in Hebrew, buh-OO-sheem, which is also translated as stinking, worthless things.<sup>1</sup> In anger and sorrow, God—the keeper of the vineyard—declares that it is not worth saving the vines that produce such awful fruit. Tear down the walls, let the things rot where they are; clearly a people like this are not worth protecting from the world around them. Israel can fall apart, for all the Lord of Hosts cares anymore.

I had a teacher tell me once that, as a preacher, I should always find a way to preach the Good News. I've never forgotten that, but I gotta tell ya, I fought all week with these verses to find good news in them. It's in other places in Isaiah, to be sure; Dennis Bratcher points out that in Isaiah 27, "Even the Isaiah tradition itself reverses this imagery of the vineyard and later speaks of a new vineyard that God will again plant in the land".<sup>2</sup> But here, where God says, "I will break down its wall...I will make it a waste"? Where it seems that, actually, God *can* get so exhausted by us that God walks away? Not particularly great news.

Which is precisely why it needs to be something that we talk about. No matter where we place ourselves as Christians on the spectrum of conservative to progressive or high church to low church or whatever, we all cherry-pick the Bible. We do; it's almost impossible not to, given how much there is and how many years of different contexts and viewpoints are in it. It's tempting to pull out the parts of the Bible that are cheerful, or uplifting, or fit well onto wall plaques in elegantly curled script. But we have to wrestle with the parts like this, the parts where the vineyard makes the gardener so mad, he lets the whole thing be destroyed. The Bible is, after all, about how to be faithful humans, and part of being human is recognizing that we are not always faithful.

So if we have to talk about it, let's talk about it. What, exactly, is going on with this vineyard full of sour grapes? Professor J. Blake Couey writes, "The beloved turns out to be a vineyard owner, who spared no labor or expense to ensure the productiveness of his vineyard. Despite his efforts, it produced inedible grapes. Verse 3 introduces another shift, as the vintner now speaks in the first-person ('me and my vineyard'). Despite the absurdity of bringing a lawsuit against a vineyard — although it is no more absurd than singing a love-song about one! — he convincingly argues that he bears no responsibility in the vineyard's poor production (v. 4) and is within his rights to destroy it (vv. 5-6). By now, the audience must be thoroughly confused.

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<sup>1</sup> בְּאֵשִׁים, [Strong's Hebrew: 891. בְּאֵשִׁים \(beushim\) -- stinking or worthless \(things\), wild grapes \(biblehub.com\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Cp15 Commentary Isa 5:1-7, Year C Proper 15 OT \(crivoice.org\)](#)

“Verse 7 resolves much of the tension. The vineyard owner is God, and the vineyard is the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The bountiful harvest for which God hoped was a just society, but the inedible grapes that God received instead are violence and oppression. In one of the most celebrated wordplays in biblical poetry, the Hebrew words for ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’ are *mishpat* and *tsedaqah* [*tsay-DA-kah*], while the words for ‘bloodshed’ and ‘[out]cry’ are *mispakh* and *tse ‘aqah*. It is difficult to recreate the wordplay in another language, but the New Jewish Publication Society translation captures something of the effect:

He hoped for justice,  
But behold, injustice;  
For equity,  
But behold, iniquity!”<sup>3</sup>

It is, perhaps, not much of a stretch for us to understand the heartbreak of wishing for justice, for equity, for righteousness, and instead finding whole vines’ worth of iniquity. It is a particular kind of pain - that disappointment. Maybe you haven’t grown a vineyard, recently, but you’ve spent a lot of time on a relationship that you realize is never going to get healthier, or you worked toward a promotion that went to someone else when they had not earned it, or you aligned yourself with an organization that turned out to have shady motives and actions. We humans who are made in the image of God have a deep capacity to put a lot of ourselves into a thing and to be deeply upset when that time or energy or love or whatever feels like it is wasted. How much more so when the carefully crafted vines of the people of Israel gave back injustice, bloodshed, covetousness, and pain to the God who had entered covenant with them. How terrible of Israel to do such a thing! How fortunate that we, surely, are much sweeter grapes!

This past Tuesday was the 77<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki, Japan. Last Saturday was Hiroshima. I didn’t realize until a friend of mine said something about it because my history classes never made me memorize those dates; we learned about Pearl Harbor—December 7—and Victory in Europe, VE Day—May 8, but not August 6 or 9. I’m not surprised. Whatever your opinions on the bombings themselves as a way to force Japan to surrender, I can’t imagine an Indiana public high school would be all that thrilled about making sixteen-year-olds memorize the fact that the United States dropped 21 kilotons of plutonium onto a Japanese city mostly filled with civilians, killing somewhere between 40,000 and 75,000 people instantly and severely injuring another 60,000.<sup>4</sup>

“Let me sing for my beloved / my love song concerning his vineyard; / 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”. We are not the people of Israel carving out space for ourselves in the volatile politics of the Ancient Near East. Nor are we the Allies in a desperate war that wrapped around the world and unleashed power people had only seen in nightmares before. But we are quite the vineyard, we 21<sup>st</sup> century faithful. We know all too well what it looks like for God’s creations to seek justice and find bloodshed, to hear an outcry where they searched for righteousness. We are unendingly creative in how we tell each other you are less, you are unlovable, you are inhuman, you are expendable. It may be tempting for you, citizen of two worlds, to quietly cheer the idea that God or some other force would remove the hedge so this

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<sup>3</sup> [Commentary on Isaiah 5:1-7 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2016

<sup>4</sup> [Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - 1945 | Atomic Heritage Foundation](#)

mess can be devoured or break down the wall so all the wildlife can come and tear it apart. A clean slate of this mess we humans have made with our exclusions and our excuses.

And yet.

In preaching, the preacher must always remember that no set of verses—called a pericope, if anyone wants fancy homiletic terminology for use at brunch later—stands alone. Yes, we cherry-pick the Bible, every one of us, but that doesn't mean that the rest of the tree isn't there. The overarching message of the Scripture we as Christians claim is that God does not leave; God does not give up; God does not stop caring for the creation God made; God always replants. That is what my teacher meant when he told me to always preach good news—not that all sermons need to be relentlessly upbeat, but that all sermons contain the spark of hope that never goes out because the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not, will not overcome it.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Mark S. Gignilliat writes, “John 15:1-11 is a robustly Christological take on the vineyard motif. If we as the branches are connected with Jesus the vine, fruit will be produced. This is a classic expression of faith leading to works of justice and mercy. Our righteousness is at first a gift of grace received by faith that in turn enables and engenders righteous acts. The vineyard of Christ's church produces fruit only when the church is in complete dependence on the vine.

It is a powerful image: God the Father before the cross with dead vines in his blistered hands. In the final analysis, God in a triune act of love destroyed his choicest vineyard — this is my beloved son — for the sake of planting a vineyard of love and grace in the whole world. Or as St. Paul said, ‘You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God’ (Colossians 1:5-6).”<sup>6</sup>

God created a garden and we decided that wasn't enough; God saved a people who said the new freedom needed more; God acted as lord and the people demanded a king; God spoke through the prophets and we stopped listening; God sent Godself and we killed Him; God broke death's power and gifted us the Spirit and we drop bombs on each other. We go through this litany of the sour, worthless grapes of our history every time we take communion, and we follow the list with the proclamation, “Holy, holy, hold Lord, God of power and might...hosanna,” which means *save us*. And God will. The vineyard is never left trampled and desolate; this harvest of putrefied grapes is never the last harvest that God gathers. The story continues as God reaches out again and again with infinite grace because that is the very nature of the God we serve.

We continue in our series of “The Awakened Traveler” and this wrecked vineyard invites us to consider what journeys we may be on that need to be scrapped entirely and begun anew. Where have you become callous and cold for whatever reason, a bitter grape in a vineyard, in need of replanting yourself where you can grow into compassion and trust? Where are you putting in energy to help the vines thrive only to receive, over and over, sour and worthless fruit?

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John 1:5.

<sup>6</sup> [Commentary on Isaiah 5:1-7 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2011

Where have you sought justice and found iniquity, or been part of injustice where there should have been righteousness? Where is God telling you to tear down the walls, let the field lie fallow for a while, and start over? How could destruction be good news for you, this week?

Isaiah's allegory is not cheerful and will not be entirely welcome on a calligraphic plaque in the living room, but it matters that we see a moment in which God is so invested in us that it matters when we are not who we are called to be. It matters when we do not live with each other in a way that allows the full vine to unfurl. There is planting, and watering, and cultivating, and protecting, and waiting going on for you—and there is ripping up and composting and replanting going on for you. God does not leave the vineyard; Christ becomes the vine.

May we have the courage to uproot that which is toxic, the humility to accept our own replanting, and the grace to see God at work in and through all the ways we grow. Amen.