

Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5  
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\* Title Slide

A while ago, I was watching a news program on which a political commentator was being interviewed. The commentator used the following metaphor to explain the function of the House of Representatives compared to the function of the Senate. He said, "The House is a boiling cup of tea and the Senate is the saucer." Sadly, he didn't give any further explanation and the anchor person interviewing him didn't ask any questions about it. I was instantly intrigued. Because I love words and I pay pretty close attention to political news, I haven't been able to let it go. What was his point? Boiling cup of tea? Saucer? When the House is hot, the Senate helps cool it off? I've seen no evidence of that in my 50+ years!

The power of a metaphor is that it uses something familiar to the audience to explain something that is unfamiliar or complex. Obviously, I am familiar with cups of tea and saucers, but for the life of me, I cannot figure out what they have to do with the legislative branch of our federal government. I welcome your reflections on the meaning behind this metaphor. And in exchange, I will share my reflections on the metaphors from Isaiah that are before us today. These metaphors function a lot like Jesus' parables as they use something ordinary to get the audience's attention and to make a larger point.

Today, we are looking at texts from First Isaiah, which encompasses chapters 1-39 of the book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-55 are Second Isaiah and 46-66, Third Isaiah. There is significant evidence that each part of Isaiah was written by a different author or authors. Presumably, one of

the authors was the prophet Isaiah who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, which included Jerusalem.

Chapters 5-12 of Isaiah contain prophecies that pertain to the war which included Syria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel against the Southern Kingdom, Judah, in 735-732 BCE. As we read these texts, it's important to note that, as far as Isaiah was concerned, all political success or failure was directly related to the moral condition of the society. In other words, the only reason a war would be lost was that the people were not following God's ways. Our reading today begins with a metaphor which assesses, with brutal honesty, the moral condition of Judah. This passage is generally called "The Song of the Vineyard." In it, the prophet says he will sing a love song, and it's like he strums a few pleasant chords, and just as the audience settles in to listen to Elvis sing "Can't Help Falling in Love," everything changes, the needle is drug across the record and suddenly it's Aretha Franklin singing, "Respect."

\* Let me sing for my beloved  
my love-song concerning his vineyard:  
My beloved had a vineyard  
on a very fertile hill.  
<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem  
and people of Judah,  
judge between me  
and my vineyard.

<sup>4</sup> 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?

\*<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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!

The people of Judah were very familiar with vineyards and what made for a successful vineyard that would produce good wine. This particular winemaker was meticulous. He made sure *this* vineyard had it all. And yet, the grapes the vineyard produced were not good grapes that would become wine. They were wild grapes, sour, maybe even rotten. The audience would have known all about wild grapes. They would have known what they look like and smell like. They may have even

known what wine tasted like when it was made from wild grapes...and it wasn't good.

But this wasn't about a winemaker or grapes. This was about God and the people of Judah; the people were the unproductive vineyard. Wild grapes were not what this winemaker expected. Now, this text loses a little bit of itself when it is translated from its original Hebrew.

\* We lose a play on words. God expected mishpat (justice) and got mispach (bloodshed). God expected tse'daqah (righteousness), but heard tse'aqah (a cry). When Isaiah used the words for justice and righteousness together, he was imagining a world in which the rights of all, including the most marginalized, are respected, a reasonable expectation in light of all that God had done. God was angry that the people of Judah were not producing justice and righteousness and the evidence of that anger, as far as Isaiah was concerned, was that Judah was losing the war.

To varying degrees, we are probably all familiar with the agony of unfulfilled expectations-the pregnancy that never happened or ended too soon; the promotion that was earned and never given; the love of a lifetime that walked away. There are times when we have done everything right, only to have it all go wrong. Imagine how the people of Judah felt as they sympathetically listened to the woes of this attentive winemaker, only to find out this was a story about them and how they had disappointed God. And then to learn that God would do nothing more for them. The vineyard would be abandoned, there would be no rain, no life.

We should read this text as a word about Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a prophecy about the enemy's victory over Judah. But these words have meaning for us today. We live in a world where justice is displaced by

the violence of poverty, racism, and war, where God's people are left crying out. And do we hear them?

A colleague, who serves a church in Wisconsin, and I were in conversation about this text. He shared that the Wisconsin Assembly recently passed a resolution recognizing Thanksgiving week as National Bible Week, as a way of encouraging residents to honor the Bible and the morals and values it has contributed to our society. There are a couple of problems with this, not the least of which is that sacred line we ought to guard carefully between church and state. But, let's just say for a moment that line doesn't exist and it is okay for the legislature to lift up a religious text in this manner. And let's forget that there are many, many people who live in Wisconsin who are not Christian and whose faith traditions have contributed positive things to the culture of Wisconsin and this nation. Even forgetting all of this, there is a big problem with the resolution. You see, this resolution was passed on the heels of their cutting funding for programs for the homeless, refusing to expand medical care for thousands of people including children, and they failed to address two life-saving gun violence prevention bills. "Honoring" the Bible's contributions while completely ignoring what the Bible actually says is, metaphorically speaking, a good example of the vineyard producing wild grapes, which are good for nothing.

The vineyard (us) is supposed to produce fruit for the nourishment of the world. The spirit of God continues to nurture and tend, yet God's people have failed to produce what the world needs-justice, peace, compassion. Isaiah's parable is pretty clear that, at some point, God will give up. But, is that what we believe? Well, I don't. And Isaiah didn't either. We don't have to go very far to find proof of that. Just a few chapters later, in Isaiah 11, we read this:

- \* A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- <sup>2</sup> 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.
- <sup>3</sup> 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;
- <sup>4</sup> 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.
- <sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- <sup>6</sup> 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.
- <sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- <sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
- <sup>9</sup> 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.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Here is Isaiah’s promise of a future king from the line of David. The promise is expressed metaphorically in terms of a

“branch” from the “stump” of Jesse, King David’s father. But it isn’t just the king’s DNA that will matter, it will be his character. His character will be consistent with what God was expecting from the vineyard. We might think of these verses as the reversal of the destruction predicted there. Out of death will spring new life. Here, in chapter 11, Isaiah’s words bring a persistent human hope for justice, righteousness, and peace. He promises the people of Judah a new king that will unify Israel and bring about the reign of God, which is entirely about how God’s people behave toward one another and creation. The “fruit” absent in the vineyard will be present once again.

What originated as the promise of a new king in ancient Jerusalem came to be understood as the prophecy of a messiah. The messiah would be a real king, with a real throne, military might and power. But under this king’s reign, the ones who had been oppressed, the ones for whom justice and mercy had never come, would finally live in peace. He would use his might for the good of the people. The Jewish people are still waiting for that messiah. Christians have understood Jesus as the fulfillment of this text. Certainly, Jesus was not a king in the ways Isaiah, in his context, understood kingship. But Jesus did bring a message of justice and righteousness, a message of the reign of God, into the first century Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire.

That message is for 21<sup>st</sup> century Bartlesville, OK too. When we look at the texts of Isaiah 5 and Isaiah 11 together, we see, I believe, what God sees. We are both the unproductive vineyard and we are the ones who have the capacity to bring about something new in the world, something that looks more like the sprouting of a tree than dead grape vines. Because, like I said last week, human beings are complicated. Isaiah, in chapter 11, offers us an alternative vision for how the world can be. In the stories of Jesus, we are offered an alternative vision for how the world can be. I wonder, are these visions not compelling enough for us? Do they not excite us enough to cause us to seek them

with everything we have? Or, is it worse than that? Do we not believe them? In the midst of a world gone crazy, have we just stopped trusting that something better is possible?

I believe something better is possible. I think you believe it too. I watch as you volunteer in the community, as you care for this church, giving your time and your other resources. I watch as you take care of each other, as your hearts break when you hear of the suffering of others. We cannot give up on Isaiah's vision, on Jesus' vision, we cannot stop working together to make God's vision a reality.

In a couple of weeks, we will celebrate the first week of Advent. Coincidentally, the text from Isaiah 11 is often read in worship during Advent, usually on the first Sunday when we are reminded that the message of Jesus, like the message of the prophet, was a message of hope. By the time Advent begins, this sanctuary will be transformed, with lights, candles, a tree, and of course, the new something above the communion table. The smells of Christmas will be hanging in the air. By then, the nursery remodel will be finished, everything will be in its place.

But none of that will matter if, in our deepest selves, we aren't a little bit like that winemaker we read about, if we aren't expecting something really good to happen.

\* Our Advent theme this year is "What Can't Wait?" Advent, itself, is a time of waiting. But the truth is, there are some things for which the world cannot wait any longer. Each week, we will connect the world's need to the story of the birth of a baby. It could be any baby really. For within each one of us is the potential to change the world. The birth of Jesus changed the world, not because he came as a king to conquer and wear a fancy crown, but because he reflected God's love into it. And that's what we can do and must do too. You know people who

desperately need the message of the seasons of Advent and Christmas. You know people who need the community we find in gathering at this table, in learning and being together. I hope you will invite them to join us for worship in December. And I hope you will make a commitment to be here too. The world cannot wait any longer. Amen.