

Isaiah 5:1-7

5¹⁻² I'll sing a ballad to the one I love,
a love song about his vineyard:
The one I love had a vineyard,
a fine, well-placed vineyard.
He hoed the soil and pulled the weeds,
and planted the very best vines.
He built a lookout, built a winepress,
a vineyard to be proud of.
He looked for a vintage yield of grapes,
but for all his pains he got junk grapes.

³⁻⁴ “Now listen to what I'm telling you,
you who live in Jerusalem and Judah.
What do you think is going on
between me and my vineyard?
Can you think of anything I could have done
to my vineyard that I didn't do?
When I expected good grapes,
why did I get bitter grapes?

⁵⁻⁶ “Well now, let me tell you
what I'll do to my vineyard:
I'll tear down its fence
and let it go to ruin.
I'll knock down the gate
and let it be trampled.
I'll turn it into a patch of weeds, untended, uncared for—
thistles and thorns will take over.
I'll give orders to the clouds:
'Don't rain on that vineyard, ever!'"

⁷ Do you get it? The vineyard of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies
is the country of Israel.
All the men and women of Judah
are the garden he was so proud of.
He looked for a crop of justice
and saw them murdering each other.
He looked for a harvest of righteousness
and heard only the moans of victims.

Isaiah 11:1-5

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The 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. ³His 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; ⁴but 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. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

A Curious Kind of Love Song

A sermon preached at the First Congregational Church of Granby
by the Rev. Dr. Virginia McDaniel
November 15, 2015 – Isaiah 5:1-7

“Let me sing for the one I love a love-song about his vineyard.”

Now, I’m not going to call myself an expert on love ballads, but what kind of love song is this?!?! Isaiah sings about someone doing everything possible to grow good grapes in this 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 the vineyard; and a wine vat was built in anticipation of the abundant harvest. So far, so good. The love-song is pleasant to the ears, and listeners’ heartstrings must be touched by the nurturing care given to the vineyard. What a wonderful love-song this prophet Isaiah sings.

But wait! Before we are lulled to sleep with these tender words, listen to what follows... The vineyard, so carefully prepared, has failed to produce good fruit, and so the vineyard owner decides to destroy it. He says, “I will tear down its fence and let it go to ruin. I’ll knock down the gate and let it be trampled. I’ll turn it into a patch of weeds, untended, uncared for—thistles and thorns will take over. I’ll even give orders to the clouds: ‘Don’t rain on that vineyard—ever!’”

Ouch! These sounds more like the bitter words of a jilted lover! The verses are condemning and harsh. This is no gentle love song; it’s more like deafening heavy-metal rock that screams of violent destruction. And then it gets worse as Isaiah explains that he’s not really talking about a vineyard at all. It’s a metaphor. God is the vineyard owner and the people are represented by the unruly grape vines. *The people* failed to produce what God expected of them. This dramatic song ends with Isaiah crying out, “God looked for a crop of justice and saw the people murdering each other. God expected a harvest of righteousness, but heard only the moans of victims!”



Friends, I’ve told you in the past that I sometimes struggle with being a “lectionary preacher.” It takes me to passages of scripture that I’d rather not deal with—this being one. I’d like to bring you along with how my thinking on this text unfolded this week. There are a couple of things you should know about the task of preaching.

First, as a Christian preacher, I take seriously that we are grounded in a historical tradition. It means that I take seriously our history... that we are descendants of a long

line of **people** who sought to be in relationship to a loving Creator. It also means taking seriously our **tradition**, contained—at least in part—in the words of scripture that we call holy. While I do not take the bible literally, I do take it seriously. I approach scripture looking for what it has to say to us, today, in our time.

Second, I am your resident theologian—you pay me to think about God. My task as a theologian and preacher is to open myself and us to the words and ideas of ancient peoples seeking to make connections with our lives today. I can't just toss aside a passage that makes me uncomfortable.

But the text for this week is so harsh and condemning! What does this tough-love message of the prophet Isaiah have to say to us? How do these harsh words about the Creator's disappointment relate to us?

Then I turned on the evening news Friday night and started hearing about the unfolding terrorists attack in the heart of Paris. And I realized what I had to say. This passage from the ancient prophet Isaiah is not a just an accusation of human sinfulness. **It is a lament.** "God looked for a crop of justice and saw the people murdering each other. God expected a harvest of righteousness, but heard only the moans of victims!"

We are created through love to be loving, and yet we live in the midst of so much pain and brokenness! God's "heart" must ache for all the violence in our world—that which is focused on by the media in Paris Friday night, no doubt horrific, **and that which is ignored daily**—100 victims of gun violence daily in the US, those killed and injured by a suicide bomber in Beirut on Thursday, those killed when a Russian passenger plane was brought down over the Sinai last weekend, the massacre in Turkey last month, those killed and hurt by white right wing terrorists in the US and Europe, and so much more. Surely a loving Creator must be frustrated and disappointed... and angry.

Where is a word of hope? I found it in a letter, written by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Founder and Director of The Shalom Center in Washington, D.C.

In 1984, when the nuclear arms race was in speed-up mode, The Shalom Center built a *sukkah* between the White House and the Soviet Embassy in Washington. [A *sukkah* is the temporary shelter, put up outdoors, to celebrate the festival of *Sukkot*, which is a harvest festival that follows Yom Kippur. The holiday commemorates the Jewish people's wandering in the desert after they left Egypt when they lived in temporary tent-like structures—simple booths called *sukkot*.]

Rabbi Waskow describes why they built this sukkah:

We focused on the line from the evening prayers—“*Ufros alenu sukkat shlomekha*”
“Spread over all of us Your *sukkah* of shalom.”

And we asked, “Why a sukkah?” Why does the prayer plead to God for a **sukkah** of peace rather than God’s “house” or “palace” of peace?

Because the *sukkah* is just a hut, the most vulnerable of houses. Vulnerable in time, where it lasts for only a week each year. Vulnerable in space, where its roof must be not only leafy but leaky—letting in the starlight, and gusts of wind and rain.

We try to achieve peace and safety by building with steel and concrete and toughness. Pyramids, air raid shelters, Pentagons, World Trade Centers. Walls. Hardening what might be targets and, like Pharaoh, hardening our hearts against what is foreign to us.

But the *sukkah* reminds us: We are in truth all vulnerable.

On 9/11 we were reminded of that vulnerability... that even the greatest oceans do not protect us; even the mightiest buildings do not shield us; even the wealthiest balance sheets and the most powerful weapons do not make us safe.

There are only wispy walls and leaky roofs between us. The planet is in fact one interwoven web of life. I MUST love my neighbor as I do myself, because my neighbor and I are connected. Only a world where we all recognize our vulnerability can become a world where all communities feel responsible to all other communities. And only such a world can prevent such acts of rage and murder.

Vulnerability. Vulnerability is both a blessing and a curse. As the foundation of democracy, openness has the potential to be a curse, in that all our economic power and cultural might, all the training and dedication of our police, military and intelligence communities cannot protect us from someone intent on destruction and violence.

But vulnerability also allows us connect like a healthy vine. Vulnerability allows us to weep with the bereaved. If your heart has never been broken, if your trust has never been violated, if you have never been the victim of any of life’s gross injustices, then

you might respond to the horrors of school shootings and terrorist attacks with cynical indifference, and shrug, saying “That’s just how the world is.”

But that’s NOT how it is. History and tradition remind us that God intends for us to be connected by love, through our vulnerability.

This does not mean we ignore or forgive those who perpetrate such horrors. Violence must be halted, the law of civilization demands that we seek to bring killers to justice—and the pain behind them must be heard and addressed. Like the owner of the vineyard looking for a “crop of justice” and a “harvest of righteousness” ... anger is an appropriate response. But not just anger. Anger that propels action.

To quote a contemporary Isaiah, Nobel 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. 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.”¹

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.

Will you pray with me? God of loving compassion, embrace the sorrowing, fearful, and anguished people of Paris. Others also cry to you from the gloom of war and violence. Hear them, O God, and make us hear them, too, that we might bind the wounds and bind the spirits wailing in the night. Amen.

¹ from Elie Wiesel’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1986, accessed 11/14/15 at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-acceptance_en.html