

Hespeler, 4 October, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:7-15, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21:33-46

In three of our readings today – in Isaiah, Psalms and the Gospel of Matthew we find the very same very powerful image being used. The nation and people of Israel are described as a vineyard that has been intentionally planted and maintained by a very careful vintner.

Vineyards are a rather interesting kind of farm. Grapes themselves are not really all that hard to grow. They grow wild in many climates and the vines spread easily and spontaneously. Growing *good* grapes – and especially grapes that make good wine – is another matter. For that you have to have just the right strain, the right soil and even small variations in the microclimate can make or break your batch.

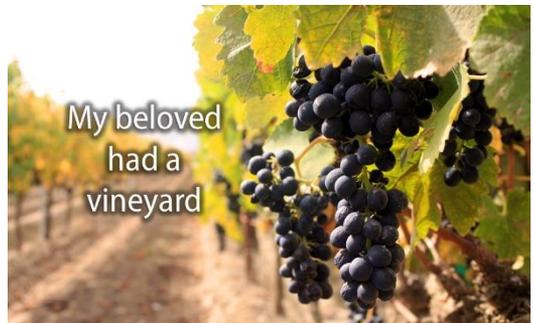
So, the vintner in our Bible passages is very careful indeed, selecting just the right vine – even importing it from Egypt at great personal cost. He carefully roots all of the other strains of grapes out of his garden so that they will not contaminate his precious vine and, of course, he protects his investment by building walls to keep out invasive foragers and a watchtower to guard against bigger threats. This is all to show how valued the vineyard is to the vintner – how much he is looking forward to tasting his excellent vintage.

You can understand, therefore, why the people of Israel liked to think of themselves as a vineyard. It made them feel valued and protected. So, when the Prophet Isaiah and the psalmist and Jesus of Nazareth pulled out this image, I am quite sure that the people in the crowd smiled because they thought that was a pretty nice way to describe themselves.

Of course, we should probably note that it was not an image without its problems. It is one thing to cultivate grapes by carefully eliminating variant strains, but when you do that with a nation and with a people, that is called eugenics. And it's often a short trip from eugenics to ethnic cleansing and genocide. When, according to the Book of Joshua, God brought the people of Israel from Egypt and “planted” them in the Promised Land, driving out the nations to plant that vine is described in terms of the people of Israel slaughtering whole cities and tribes. But, of course, the people didn't really like to dwell on that part of the story but rather on that sense of security and importance that they gained from living inside what felt like a well built and protected vineyard.

And I think that we as Canadians can definitely understand that sentiment.

In fact, it is kind of the same story that we have told ourselves for so long. We are like a vine that God has brought to live in this place. I know that we didn't all come from the same place. Some, however many generations ago, were transplanted from England, Scotland or Ireland. Many were



transplanted from Germany, the Netherlands or from many places far beyond. And, yes, that transplanting involved the displacement of peoples and nations that were here before and a lot of that went very poorly for the people who were displaced.

But, of course, we don't really like to dwell on that part of the story because we know that we have enjoyed so many blessings in this place. It has been, for us, like a well-protected vineyard with sturdy walls surrounding us from danger and a high watchtower to guard our safety. We have prospered in this land and, in that prosperity, we have been able to spread out and fill the land from sea to sea to another sea in the north. And we have been grateful for that.

Oh yes, we do like to do a fair bit of complaining. We complain against this government or that one. We love to complain about our neighbours in the vineyard to the south and how they have to make everything about them. We wouldn't be human if we didn't complain sometimes. But we have felt truly blessed and grateful to be able to live in this wonderful vineyard.

That is where all three of our readings start this morning, with a well protected and prosperous vineyard. But actually, the well protected and prosperous vineyard is not the actual topic of any of these readings. In all three cases, we see the wall broken down and strangers coming in and laying ruin to the vineyard. We see the guard tower abandoned so that enemies might have a free hand. You see, all of these passages were written in the aftermath of national catastrophes – three different catastrophes as a matter of fact because these kinds of things keep happening throughout history.

The passage in Isaiah was written after an Assyrian invasion, the psalm was likely written after a Babylonian destruction and the gospel passage was written after the Romans destroyed the nation and city of Jerusalem. So these were three very different disasters but they sought to understand and interpret them with this powerful image of a broken down and wasted vineyard.

It is not a coincidence that we were given these three readings this morning. I don't think that, if we had had these readings a year ago, we would have heard them in quite the same way. For we had no reason to think that the walls of our vineyard and the protections we thought we had would be broken down. We saw no real reason to think that our long-term prosperity would, in any way, be interrupted.

But today I don't think I really have to tell you why all kinds of people are not feeling as if this vineyard is so safe and prosperous anymore. The amazing thing is that it really didn't seem to take all that much to make it feel like that. It took something really small, a virus so tiny that you need a very powerful microscope even to see it. It took little bit of political chaos in the vineyard to the south of us as a number of political norms seem to be fading away.

We are at our own wasted vineyard moment and I believe that God has sent us these three passages today to help us deal with where we are right now. And I know that some people might say to me that I shouldn't sound defeatist here and imagine that our present problems are going to be permanent. And I agree, I think

that it is important to remember that there is going to come a day when a lot of these present troubles are forgotten. But, at the same time, I do believe that there is a need to understand where we are right now and to learn whatever lessons God may have for us in this moment.

And there are lessons to be learned. In fact, in each of our readings this morning I see a different lesson. First of all, we have the psalm this morning. And the interesting thing about the psalm is that it doesn't actually call for the people to do anything in response to the disaster. Psalm 80 is what we call a psalm of lament. It is basically one long complaint in which the people tell God all the ways that they feel disappointed and let down by what has happened.

But this is actually, I think, an important and necessary response in a tragedy. When things go wrong, I think we often don't give ourselves the permission we need to just say how bad it is, to complain and tell the honest truth about how we are feeling. I realize that it can be dangerous to let those kind of emotions out sometimes and that there are times when it's just not appropriate and people with whom we just can't do it, but we still need to give an outlet to these feelings. One thing that this Psalm is telling us is that it is okay to do that with God. No matter what you may be feeling about the current crises, know that you can take it to the Lord in prayer. Your anger, your fear, your exasperation will be met by the abundant grace of God.

So that is one response, just taking your emotions to God. But our reading from Isaiah takes us to another conclusion, tells us that God is looking for another response from us as well. The prophecy from Isaiah concludes like this: **“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!”**

That lays before us a significant challenge. We have a God who is deeply committed to justice – to seeing a society where there is respect and opportunity for every person, no matter who they may be. God is particularly committed to finding such justice for the poorest and most marginalized in our society. So, as people of faith, we are constantly called to be at work for such justice in this world. I believe that this call for justice is particularly highlighted in this passage in Isaiah because, when we are going through times like this – when we are feeling like our nice secure and stable vineyard has been broken down and we're in crisis mode, we often assume that this is not the time to work on the bigger issues of societal justice – we're kind of concentrating on just surviving.

But Isaiah reminds us that this is the very time when such efforts are more important than ever. There is a certain phenomenon that comes into play in situations like this. It is called disaster capitalism. Naomi Klein called it the shock doctrine. Basically, there are people who see any sort of disaster or breakdown in society as an incredible opportunity to enrich themselves.

And we have absolutely seen that in this present crisis as the richest people in North America have seen their wealth grow remarkably during this time even as those who are on the lower end of the economic scale have found themselves

slipping even further. While we have all been distracted dealing with the crisis, economic disparity has only grown. So, yes, this is the time to be thinking about and working towards justice for everyone and that's going to have to include a more just economic system, addressing racial inequalities and a whole host of other issues. This, Isaiah makes it clear, is part of the important work we must be doing when the vineyard is in crisis.

So we have one response in the psalm, another in the prophet Isaiah, and then we come to the parable of the vineyard in the Gospel of Matthew. And, I'm going to warn you, this is a very difficult parable to understand and interpret. I could probably spend many sermons trying to understand exactly what Jesus was trying to communicate in it. It's a troubling parable in many ways. And I think it's actually a key to understanding the whole approach taken by the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. So I'm not really going to try and come up with a definitive application of this parable to the situation we find ourselves in today.

What I'm going to do is pick out one element that I definitely think applies to the situation where we find ourselves. The key moment in this parable comes, I think, with the appearance of the landowner's son. **“Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.”**

And it is pretty clear how we are intended to read that part of the parable. The son seems intended to be 2a reference to Jesus himself – the eternal Son sent from the Father above. And the great tragedy in this story seems to be a failure to recognize what God has done in sending his son. Whatever has gone before, whatever justification the tenants may have had for failing to pay their rents, this is when it all crosses the line – when they fail to recognize that God has somehow stepped into their story.

Does that have an application to the particular moment in which we find ourselves today in this broken vineyard? I think it does. Whatever else we do during this time, we need to keep ourselves open to what it is that God is about to do in this world. We need to believe that God is alive and at work, perhaps surprising ways and, when we recognize what God is doing, we need to be ready to get on board.

My friends, this vineyard of ours is presently in a poor state and that is troubling. We are not the first to find ourselves in such a situation nor shall we be the last. The Bible tells us that, when such situations arise, we can do well if we follow the examples that we find in these scriptures. Be open and honest with God about how you're feeling through all of this. Be ready, especially at times like this, to stand up for what is just and right in our society. And keep your eyes open for the movement of God within our world. It will happen and, when it does, you're going to want to be part of it. It is in this last point that I think we ought to be putting our greatest hope.