

*Texts: Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5; Mark 12:1-3*

*Subject: Isaiah's Vineyard Song*

*Theme: What Comes Next*

*Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost; Nov. 17, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,  
Amen.

Injustice is all around. A prophet speaks truth to the powerful, and to the people.

There's a sense that things can't go on like this forever.

What comes next? We wonder. We wait.

With the impeachment testimony taking place in Washington, another school shooting in California, and the daily frustrations of life, many of us are looking for some comfort. This week at our house, we've been indulging in the latest online streaming service, Disney+. It's great fun. Of course, our kids have seen most of those movies dozens - if not hundreds - of times. There are original shows included - like *The Mandalorian* - a fresh Star Wars offering, new shows about the Marvel Universe, and never before seen documentaries, and short films. It has the classics too - great Disney stuff from decades past, like the Parent Trap, the Apple Dumpling Gang, Swiss Family Robinson - as well as the original Mickey cartoons, Disney nature films, and content from National Geographic. Don't worry, we did manage to get outside for a little while yesterday. Some have thought that with all the competition from Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and other streaming content providers, Disney would be taking a big gamble jumping into this industry, but I think it's safe to say they'll be ok. This is Vegas - we know about taking a risk. Most of us like a safe bet. We want to think we know what's going to happen next. Betting's never been my thing - but I get it. **We want outcomes to meet our expectations.**

So far so good, Disney.

For ancient Israel, things were worse. The prophet Isaiah lived in a time when the Assyrian empire was the superpower, and had destroyed the Northern Kingdom, leaving Judah the Southern Kingdom along with Jerusalem, in danger. The people saw their best and brightest taken away from them. We can only imagine the level of anxiety all around, as the people wondered what would come next.

Not a whole lot is known about the person Isaiah, to whom we attribute the first 33 chapters of the Book of Isaiah. He was likely well off, and spoke out for about 40 years - a long time - about economic injustice, mostly calling the people to be cleansed - they had been tarnished by idolatry, and the injustice in the world. They were at war constantly - they had turned from their focus on God, and pursued wealth over everything, at the expense of the poor.

Isaiah sings this song - and we might imagine him singing it - a love song about a vineyard. It was well planned, given everything it needed - like that first garden in scripture - it was made for good. The expectation was that it would be everything it was supposed to be: *Good vineyards produce good fruit. Good grapes produce good wine.*

But wild grapes were grown. The literal translation is *stink berries*.

I was at one of the wineries out in Pahrump a while back, and as they tasted the wine, I don't think anyone said, "Ah yes, I detect notes of cherry, alder wood, and stink berries." Wild grapes were sour, unusable, not good for much. The grapes were allowed to grow wild at times. On the sabbath, and around the time of the jubilee - they were gleaned - or picked over after the harvest by those who were in need. But that's not what the vineyard was meant for.

What do you do with a faulty vineyard? Shut it down. Tear it down. Let it be returned to nature - to suffer the consequences of what it has become. An overgrown waste. Dried up. A field of stumps. That's what comes next.

And just in case we don't understand the metaphor - hear the prophet explain:

*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 5:7, The Message)*

God is the one who planted the garden, and God expected justice - *mishpat*, but got only *mispach* - bloodshed. God expected righteousness, *tzedaqah*, but heard a cry-*tse'ahqah*. The words matter. In Hebrew they look the same, but mean quite different things. The Word the Lord spoke created and expected one thing but got the other.

My friend Tim is a passionate guy. He's from South Carolina and speaks with a thick southern drawl that reminds me of a football coach or a barbecue expert. He's a carpenter. He remodels homes, builds decks, fences - works with his hands. He is a devoted and intentional father and husband. He spends a lot of time serving others, especially though men's ministry. But what really cranks his engine is making disciples. He is a passionate follower of Jesus, and takes seriously the Great Commission. Remember, Jesus said, Go, make disciples of all nations...Tim takes that very seriously. He is always talking about 'bearing good fruit.' He's been burned by the church, but loves God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. He meets with a cohort of carefully selected folks for months at a time, leading them, teaching them, that they would take seriously the call to go into the world and live in a way that shows the 'fruit of the Spirit' in the world. Tim has inspired so many to live faithfully, and to share the hope

and love of Jesus in their lives and relationships. He is living out the life he was made for, using his gifts, doing what he was made to do.

Are we? Or have you felt the opposite? Have you felt like a pile of stink berries at times? Like wild sour grapes? Good for nothing? Have you ever felt like you were wasting the gifts God gave you? When the outcomes of our lives don't seem to meet our expectations, we wonder: what comes next? Where can I go? What can I do? It's all a waste now. I should just give up. There's no hope.

In our community, we have seen injustice. We have met our neighbors who ran from bullets on October 1, 2017. We know the ones who still sleep outdoors, who come here for help, for food, who stop by Martin's Mart for clothing, who call on Lutheran Social Services for birth certificates, rental and utility assistance. We know there is massive inequality every time we drive by a new stadium being constructed and pass people with cardboard signs begging in the intersection. We know there are children and seniors without a place to sleep tonight in this city. I see it - I have to name it - to call it what it is - this is bloodshed - this is a cry.

The people of Judah must have been starting to feel that way too. The poor, the widows and orphans were left along the roadside. They weren't cared for, the ones they thought they could turn to were not helping. The leaders were corrupt, those with means just consolidated their wealth and power. And the prophet speaks God's Word of judgement:

*Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,  
who write oppressive statutes,  
to turn aside the needy from justice  
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,  
that widows may be your spoil,*

*and that you may make the orphans your prey!  
What will you do on the day of punishment,  
in the calamity that will come from far away?  
To whom will you flee for help,  
and where will you leave your wealth,  
so as not to crouch among the prisoners  
or fall among the slain?  
**For all this his anger has not turned away;  
his hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 10:1-4)***

Even after all of this - the Lord is still present. Still near. Still giving help.

The prophet now speaks a promise: From the stump - a shoot - new growth from the wasteland. Yes, from the family of Jesse - whose own family tree had been laid to ruin, there would be...hope. The promise of a new king - one who would lead with equity, who would have the gifts of God's wisdom, justice, mercy, and grace on his side. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest with this one - not just relying on the word of others, he would judge with rightness, would give liberty to those enslaved by broken systems and inequality, would bring about the end of those who would do evil. The prophet promises there is one who will wear rightness and faithfulness like a belt.

After bloodshed and the crying of those in need, comes judgment.

The promise comes next. The prophet says there is still hope for Israel.

Hear this word today - there is still hope for you, too.

Advent is coming - and in this prophecy we can't help but hear the promise of the coming savior - from the line of Jesse and David, who loves us, and build us up, giving us all we need for an abundant harvest.

There is hope.

Look around - look for the shoots coming up from the stumps - there is new growth.

We are not alone - never does the Lord say, I will abandon this vineyard - there is

judgement, yes, but the Lord is still near. The promise is still good, still coming true every day. The one who IS righteousness - who IS faithful is coming, is already here - will not leave us or this world. He is ours forever. You have been given gifts! You have been called to use them - to love, to learn, to serve, to pray, to share, to be and make disciples. This is our calling as church, as the one, holy, catholic, apostolic body of Christ - made by the Word for the sake of the world. We have been grafted onto that vine of Israel through our Lord Jesus, and called through the living Word of God, to live out mercy and grace in this place we've been planted.

This desert can yield fruit again. Not stink berries, but big fat juicy fruit, as my friend Tim would say, that good stuff - the best of the best.

This church can be what it was meant to be - a place of hope, help, and haven, a community of grace, a family of faith, loving each other, loving God and neighbor, gathered to serve and share the heart of Christ in the heart of the city.

Amen.