

A Vision of a Vineyard

Lectionary Text: Isaiah 5: 1-7

Sunday Worship, Bering Memorial UMC

Sunday, August 19, 2007

I. Singing our Own Songs

Think for a minute. What is your favorite song? That's probably not an easy question to answer. For me, if someone asks me that question, my answer probably begins with "well, that depends". Do you mean a favorite hymn? (That would probably be "Be Thou My Vision"—at least this week.) Do you mean a favorite hymn tune? (Anything to "Beech Spring") Do you mean favorite words? That would be "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" (but there's a better tune than what is in the hymnal) Do you mean the one that means the most? That would be "It is Well With My Soul", which ends almost every funeral in my family.

Oh, you mean songs that we do not sing in church. Well, it could be anything by Kenny G, because it reminds me of my parent's dog Max that loved saxophone music. It could be anything by Shostokovich, because I get lost in the haunting, soulful chords and can almost always re-experience walking through Red Square or St. Petersburg's Hermitage or the hilly terrain filled with onion domes in Suzdal, Russia. It could just as easily be the Righteous Brothers' "You've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'", which years ago became the mantra of our family ski trips as my brother and I sang it at the top of our lungs as we were mechanically lifted up the mountain, providing quite the show for the skiers underneath us and, best of all, embarrassing my mother beyond description.

Or maybe favorite songs are those things that don't necessarily conjure up memories but rather create a vision of life that was not there before. I guess Norah Jones, Josh Groban, Mozart, Celtic music, and John Lennon's "Imagination" do that best for me. The point is, though, that songs have a tendency to compel us to revisit and revision our lives and somehow are often capable of resetting us even where we stand, either through their familiarity or through their ability to delve into and transcend the very depths of our soul.

II. The Beginning of a Love Song

So our reading from Isaiah begins with a song, probably for much the same reason that we are drawn to certain music. Because in this passage, the writer takes up the role of minstrel, as he or she begins "*I will sing for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard.*" This is really a striking beginning. No where else in the Old Testament is such intimate language used to express the relationship between a person and God. It sets the stage for what

we think is to come: a loving tribute, a wonderful feel-good love song that brings visions of beauty and love and goodwill, because usually when a biblical passage begins with a reference to a song, it is a joyful or triumphant occasion. Poetry and song, lyrics and music—they are the stuff of ritual celebration for the people. But that is not the song we about to hear; because, unlike most of the Hebrew love poetry, this song quickly loses its beauty and sensuality and gives way to a sort of judicial oracle. The “Song of the Vineyard” becomes a parable of judgment against the Hebrew people for their continued disobedience of God. The words of this song remind us that God did not merely create humanity and then set down Creation with everything that was needed for our enjoyment. The passage tells us that God expects something from us. God invites us to a new vision of the world around us. That is the song that we are about to hear.

III. A Look at the Scripture Passage

The setting of this first part of Isaiah, which includes this passage, is generally assumed to be set in the 8th century before the common era, probably sometime between the death of King Uzziah of Judah and the final fall of Judah in 701 b.c.e. During this time, Judah became a vassal of Assyria and fell into practices that were not in accordance with a right relationship with God, falling into the traps of practicing social oppression and allowing social injustices to pervade their society in what the prophet saw as an out and out rejection of God and what God calls them to be. Assuming that this song was indeed “sung” by the prophet or even just recited in the form of love poetry, one can easily imagine it to be an effective way of gathering listeners for the speech on social justice that was to follow.

The parable begins with a portrayal of a vineyard nestled on a lush and fertile hill. In its original context, the prophet probably meant it is a metaphor for the people of Israel, with the owner being God. God has prepared the way and has “planted” Israel with everything that she would need to grow and prosper, including seeds for the best vines that should produce the best of harvests. The image of the fertile soil depicts an image of growing, ongoing life. There is nothing stagnant about God’s gift of Creation.

According to the passage, the owner has “dug it and cleared it of stones.” This implies that God has worked for this—this is not just some “haphazard” act of Creation. The people have been given all that is required; God only expects that they yield the fruits of faith in response to God’s gift of Creation. God has planted this lush, green vineyard with choice vines, those deep red vines, capable of producing the best and sweetest of fruits and the finest wines.

The song continues as the owner builds a watchtower in the vineyard, which housed a wine vat. Think about it. This image of the watchtower is one of a permanent, immovable point that is higher than everything surrounding it.

The whole vineyard can see this watchtower and from this tower, then, it is possible to view the entire vineyard. But it is more than a place of mere observation. It includes a wine vat, or winepress. This watchtower, then, is the place to which the harvest is brought, peeled, and aged. It is the place where the harvest is converted to a finely aged wine. It is the central point, the place where all come to be “aged”, changed into God’s people. For the Old Testament Hebrews, this was the temple, the center of society. It was for them that highest holy place where all came to worship God and to be formed into right relationship with their Creator.

God had done everything necessary and expected it to yield the choicest of fruits. But something went wrong and the harvest was one of wild, sour grapes which, though edible, are not fit for the making of fine wines. This is probably the key to the passage, for it is here that it is evident that the vineyard is useless without the harvest—it is just land; it is here that we are reminded that God’s Creation is meant for our response. God expects something of us.

IV. Changing Key

And then the song changes key. And now we begin to get a little uncomfortable. “And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah...” “And now inhabitants of the vineyard that God has created...” It is at this point that it becomes apparent that the parable is no longer just a nice little entertaining story but is rather an indictment and denouncement of the injustices that had overtaken this society. You know, for me, this sudden change in person and structure of the passage almost implies that those hearing it just weren’t getting it. They had gotten so wrapped up in the story that they hadn’t yet realized that it was about them.

But now the prophet is asking hard questions. “What more was there to do for my vineyard that I haven’t done? Why did it yield that which I had not planted?” Well, in truth, we know that it was not the owner’s fault. In essence, the harvest itself is to blame. The expectations that God held for its glory did not materialize because the harvest became what it was not intended to be.

And then the prophet begins to foretell the punishment that will be inflicted upon those who have not obeyed God. The hedge surrounding it will be removed, the wall will be trampled, and the vineyard will lie as waste, overtaken by briars and thorns. And yet, the vineyard is land. It cannot be completely destroyed. The punishment is really just a change in circumstances, a change in the character of the vineyard itself. The removal of the hedge and the wall implies that the vineyard will itself be unprotected. The image of briars and thorns overtaking it could be considered a metaphor for a coming change in circumstances that will shake Israel’s very existence and reshape the character of who they are. The people have not responded with new growth so God will let their circumstances, rather than divine care alone, shape what they

will become. There is no destruction. God has not deserted them. But the people will now have to save themselves by their actions and their faith. God, again, has not deserted them but has forced them to finally respond.

And then at the end for those who are apparently really slow on the uptake, the prophet explains it all: the vineyard is indeed Israel and its people are the Lord's "pleasant planting". The implication is that the inhabitants and laborers of the vineyard are no longer even listening to God. They have treated others badly, even being guilty of the act of oppression or the passive act of closing their eyes or turning their backs while social oppression happens around them. They have allowed the vineyard to be swallowed up and overtaken by their own greed, self-centeredness, and perhaps even fear. They have taken what God has provided but have not responded to God's call to action in faith.

V. So What Does This Have to Do With Us?

So what does this have to do with us? We are not Israelites. We are not Hebrews. And we're certainly not pre-dated 8th century vassals of Assyria. Oh, we know better than that! After all, the reason we read the Bible is not to learn history; it is to learn to read ourselves and our relationship with God. John Westerhoff said that "*If you are not feeling very uncomfortable after you have read a parable in the Bible, just assume that you did not get it. Its function is to turn your life upside down and get you very upset.*"¹ What begins as a beautiful love song becomes a judicial parable that should appropriately make its listeners very uncomfortable if they are honest with themselves and their actions.

So, here we go... You see, my friends, the vineyard is not just limited to Israel. The vineyard depicts all of the bounty and goodness that God has provided us. The vineyard is the whole world; indeed, the whole of God's vast and incredible Creation. The vineyard has everything that we need, including that central place of faith through Jesus Christ that feeds us and nourishes us and ages us toward perfection, the watchtower if you will, from which we can view the entire vineyard with all its beauty and all its colors and all its richness and all its wonderful diversity and from which we are called to go forth and "be fruitful", indeed to actually be the ones stomping grapes and making wine from the bountiful harvest.

And so, then, what would our song sound like? I'm afraid it may be a song of prophetic warning just like the one we've heard today. Our vineyard, too, is being overgrown with the thorns of growing abject poverty, widespread homelessness, insatiable and ravenous greed, and still-mounting prejudices and inequalities based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and a multitude of other contrived class distinctions. Our vineyard's wall is being trampled down by power struggles and the inability to accept others' cultures, others' ways of experiencing God, and others' lives. Our vineyard is being dried up and

destroyed by wars and mistreatment of the environment in which we live. Our vineyard, like the Israelites', has failed to be what it was called to be. And, lest we think we are not part of its downturn, Abraham Heschel constantly contended that in a free society, "some are guilty but all are responsible."² And, truthfully, God's judgment is in the form of God's heart breaking, seeing what has been done and knowing what can be.

Remember that watchtower, though, that point from which one could view the entire vineyard? That is what God has given us in our faith in this vision of Shalom—that vision of perfect peace and justice for all--the ability to glimpse a vision of a vineyard that is different from what we have. And in that vision, there is equality, and fruitfulness, and the realization that there is enough for all of God's children to have what they need. And that is very important to note because it is a full and bountiful table to which all of God's children are invited. And there are plenty of places set. That is the vineyard that we see from the tower. That is the vineyard that our Christian understanding and faith through Christ tells us is possible.

V. Another Parable

So, what does God expect of us? The premise of this Old Testament parable known as "The Song of the Vineyard" is probably not new to many of us. In fact, Jesus drew upon the Hebrew Scriptures which he knew so well and in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel According to Matthew, we begin by reading:

"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country."

Well, that sounds vaguely familiar. The story continues as the harvest time comes and the produce is not what was expected by the landowner. This parable, known as "The Parable of the Wicked Tenant", repeats the theme of "The Song of the Vineyard". Once again, the landowner has planted the vineyard and has done everything that is necessary to enable the vineyard to have a wonderful start. It is planted, fertilized and watered; it is protected from harm; it is pruned and shaped; then it is tilled and aged to perfection. The vineyard has all of the necessary resources to produce a wonderfully rich harvest. But once again, the harvest has not materialized: the produce is not what the owner has expected.

The people of God are like that vineyard: God has planted us and given us every resource that we need; we are created and nurtured; we are shaped and molded; then we are converted to perfection. We have all of the necessary resources to empower us toward a wonderfully rich harvest of faith. But faith is not merely the assurance that God will provide; it is also the realization that God expects something

of us—not in return, but in response. What does God expect of us? God is expecting our response—with both action and voice.

VI. A Vision of a Vineyard

But we know in our faith journey, all is not lost. God always and continuously intervenes and, just as God's love incarnate was revealed through the birth of Christ, God continually walks with us through the vineyard, calling us to what can be done to bring it into its full and final glory. That is the hope of Shalom. But, as St. Augustine said, "hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are."³

It is that courage that will enable us to see the new vision of the vineyard: That day when finally "justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." That is a vision of a vineyard. But we must open our minds to the vastness of that vision. William Sloane Coffin said that "If indeed we love the Lord with all our hearts, minds, and strength, we are going to have to stretch our hearts, open our minds, and strengthen our souls, whether our years are three score and ten or not yet twenty. God cannot lodge in a narrow mind. God cannot lodge in a small heart. To accommodate God [and God's vision], they must be palatial."⁴

So, what is your favorite song? My friends, it is whatever reminds you of what is to come. It is whatever you hold in your life that feeds and nourishes your faith in the vision that God has shown us. It is whatever opens your minds and your hearts to what God has promised and enables you to see things differently. It is whatever song you hear from God. It is whatever compels you to see the hope that God offers and work to make it so.

For any of us that understand the way a musical ensemble works know that pure harmony only happens when all the voices can be heard. Sometimes that means the top more high-pitched voices need to hold back so the deep, rich chords underneath can be heard. And other times those deep voices need to hold back so that the purity of the top can come through. We have to learn when to listen and we have to learn when to sing. Harmony depends on them both.

But either way, God has called you to find your voice. Your silence in the face of injustice is just as damaging as being a part of it. So keep listening and start singing. That is the way to spread a vision of the vineyard.

In the Name of the One who gave us life and sustenance and continually calls us to sing our song. Amen.

¹ John H. Westerhoff, III in a conference sponsored by American Baptist Churches of New York State in May 1982, as quoted from Vallet, Ronald E., *Stepping Stones of the Steward*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1989, p. 124.

² From *The Heart is a Little to the Left: Essays on Public Morality*, by William Sloane Coffin (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 1999), 19.

³ *Ibid*, 6.

⁴ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 130.