

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Courtney Veazey
Sunday, November 19, 2023

Speak to us, living God,
as you have spoken to our ancestors:
through the voices of your prophets,
the breath of your Spirit,
and the life of Christ,
so that we may live according to your word.
Amen.

Isaiah 5:1-7 and 11:1-5

“I will sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
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 rotten grapes.
And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
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 rotten grapes?
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.
I will make it a wasteland;
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.
For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his cherished garden;

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he expected justice
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness
but heard a cry!

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
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.
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,
but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed 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.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.”

Holy wisdom, holy word.
Thanks be to God.

Love songs enchant us.

Concise stories with sharp words, love songs pull us into the depth of emotions
experienced within relationships.

The tender preparations inherent to the early stages of creating something new.

The hopeful expectations for beautiful and life-giving growth.

The haunting anger when those expectations do not come to fruition.

The confusion about what went wrong and the desire to break it all down.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God sings a love song to us this morning that uses the imagery of a
vineyard – an image that appears in Scripture over 100 times.

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Isaiah sings of God's careful preparations for this vineyard – the tilling of the land, the clearing of stones, the planting of choice vines, the building of a watchtower and a winepress.

Preparations that echo the creation story found in the second chapter of Genesis in which God plants a garden.

God is a gardener, and we are God's delightful planting. We are God's lovingly tended seeds – seeds that God hopes transform into grapes whose juices overflow with the glorious tastes of justice, righteousness, equity, and faithfulness.

After the opening verses, Isaiah's song quickly moves to the bridge – to that musical moment in which a song's meaning shifts.

Isaiah sings that God expected the vineyard to yield grapes, but it yielded rotten fruit.

Following this brief bridge, we hear God's voice featured –

“What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

Why did I hope to get grapes and it put forth rotten fruit?”

We hear an exasperated and sorrowful God sing to us, “I gave you everything you needed to embody my hopes and vision. What happened?”

God's words push us to claim our painful, present reality and to confront our role in God's shattered expectations and broken heart.

Instead of a vineyard, there is a wild field.

Instead of justice, there is bloodshed.

Instead of righteousness, there are screams.

The ingenious wordplay found in Isaiah's Hebrew shows how easy it is for us to slip between justice and bloodshed and righteousness and screams.

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Instead of *mishpat*, there is *mispach*.

Instead of *tzedakah*, there is *tza'akah*.

We are heartbreakingly close, yet so far, from living in the ways God desires for us – the ones whom God creates and tenderly plants in this world – the ones for whom God “spares no effort to create an environment conducive to success.”¹

We are a wild field – a wilderness – in which thorns and thistles spring up within us and around us.

Thorns and thistles that turn God’s cherished vineyard into a wasteland – thorns and thistles that trample our souls and disconnect us from God’s vision and expectation of just and righteous living.

Toward the end of this love song, God sings about the removal of our hedges and the breaking down of our walls. This loss of feeling protected comes as we confront the consequences of putting forth rotten fruit. This loss feels deeply painful and wearisome, but I trust that in all this uprooting, God is also restoring us and offering redemption in our arid wastelands by re-tilling our soil and replanting our souls.

The Rev. Dr. Mark Stamm, a professor of Christian worship at SMU’s Perkins School of Theology, writes that “God restores us in many ways, individually and corporately. Our task is to notice the dry and hopeless places, and then to imagine them in a different state, fully alive and filled with breath.”²

¹ James Burns, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, 127.

² Mark Stamm, *Devoting Ourselves to the Prayers*, 141.

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Our task is to look at our wild fields, grieve the dry and hopeless places, repent our individual and collective sin, and begin to see the stumps and roots that eventually grow into shoots and branches thanks to the work of the Gardener.

Toward the end of the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene finds herself in a wild field as she stands weeping outside her teacher's tomb.³ A man approaches her and asks why she is weeping. This compassionate question – this reaching out to a hurting person – is a stump – a root in her dry and hopeless place. Mary supposes that this man is a gardener. What she does not realize though in her initial encounter is that he is *the* Gardener.

Like Mary, sometimes we do not initially recognize *the* Gardener's presence in our wild fields that are filled with both death and resurrection – thistles and roots – thorns and stumps.

We miss seeing the tiny tendrils of hope in our lives.

Tiny tendrils that appear as a breath – a whisper – a gardener we do not initially recognize – a reflection of Christ's kingdom that is both here and not here fully – a faint glimpse of Christ's inbreaking that we actively wait for every Advent season.

We miss noticing the tiny tendrils that swirl and take root in our desolate places – just waiting to be transformed into grapes – into the cup of salvation.

Tiny tendrils of the true vine that breathes into us a spirit of wisdom and insight, of counsel and valor, of knowledge of God's vision for justice and faithfulness.

³ John 20:1-18

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The author Arundhati Roy said, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”⁴

Can you hear the Gardener breathing as she comes toward us? Can you hear the Gardener singing a love song to us that both breaks our hearts and offers us tiny tendrils of hope? Can we hear the Gardener calling us by name?

Another world is indeed possible, and we – the Gardener’s pleasant planting, the vineyard on a fertile hill, the body of Christ – through the power of the Holy Spirit – have all that we need to resist evil and to see the stumps and roots of resurrection breaking ground in our wild fields.

⁴ Quoted in Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self*, 187.