

# Show Me the Whisker

Isaiah 5:1-7; My Beloved's Vineyard

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*Let me 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 watch-tower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it ;he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild 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 wild 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 waste; 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 pleasant planting ;he expected justice, but saw bloodshed ;righteousness, but heard a cry!*

*Isaiah 5:1-7, NRSV*

One of the very first classes I took in seminary, my very first semester, in a misguided and ill-conceived schedule of high level classes for which I had no proper pre-requisites, was the Book of Isaiah. Without having taken the Intro to the Hebrew Bible course which would have given me the historical and theological context, without having had any exposure to the Hebrew language which would have given me the linguistic and cultural context, without having so much as cracked a Bible in over 20 years, which would have given me.....at least prayer in that class, I boldly plunged into the Book of Isaiah, for my first experience with the Bible, as an adult. And I plunged into Isaiah with all of the enthusiasm and joyous expectancy with which I had experienced Rachmaninoff and Shakespeare and spinach.....as an adult. I had high hopes for Isaiah. He was, after all, the most famous prophet in the HB.

But it didn't take me long to realize that I had abandoned the Bible, and especially the Hebrew Bible, for good reason! The more I read, the more I hated it! I hated the vengeful arrogant God who professed unconditional love and then obliterated his creations for their failure to meet his lofty expectations, almost as a child lashes out at an angry fist to level a tower of her own building blocks that haven't quite turned out to her liking. I hated the unfairness with which whole slices of humanity were summarily condemned and obliterated for the transgressions of a few, or even many, but surely not all. I hated the violence. I hated the judgment. I hated the blackmail – if you please God you will flourish, and if you do not please God, you will perish. And who knew exactly what would please God

I hated the tender hooks on which the Book of Isaiah seemed to place society, and that included me - back and forth from God's judgment to God's salvation, back and forth, back and forth - and although Isaiah literally means, God is salvation, it seemed to me that there was plenty more judgment than salvation. And by the end of the course, I had pretty much summed up the Book of Isaiah thusly: you're in....you're out...you're in.....you're out....you're out.....you're out.....you're out! Smote, smote, smote....that seemed to me to be the basic prophetic message. And so I closed the Book of Isaiah that semester with my final paper and I did not open it again until I began to preach. Until my own calling required that I engage this most important prophetic text in some meaningful way for my community. And today is the day.

*Navim* - the Hebrew word for prophet. One who is called and calling.

So what is Isaiah calling us to do?

I think morning's reading, among Isaiah's most famous passages, is a great place to start with that question. It was written before the exile, and it tells, in a mere 7 verses, pretty much the entire story of the history of Israel vis-a-vis its theological identity. It tells of a just and faithful God who lovingly cultivated a people / aka a vineyard; a God who did every possible thing to ensure the health and welfare of the people / aka vineyard. And yet, the people callously and frivolously disregarded God's love and trust and defiled the beloved vineyard without regard to...anything really. This passage is generally called the "Song of the Vineyard," and it is characterized as a love song. And the first two verses do indeed sound like a love song.

*Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.*

Now, one of the wonderfully mysterious things about this reading is that we are never exactly sure who is speaking - is it God's own voice or is it the prophet Isaiah speaking on behalf of God. But whether God or God's prophet, the verbs in this first section are verbs of gentle care and loving cultivation. The voice says that the vineyard owner dug the soil, cleared it of stones, planted it with the best vines, built a tower to watch over it, and hewed out a vat for its fruit. This is a vineyard owner who has invested heavily in the wellness, the fruitfulness of this vineyard.

However, at the end of these loving and nurturing verbs, abruptly comes a verb of a very different color. For the text reads that the vineyard owner then "expected" the vineyard to yield good grapes. Apparently, all of this loving cultivation has not been unconditional. This is not a vineyard that has been planted and tended for its own sake. The vineyard owner "expects" the vineyard to yield good grapes. And yet, alas and alack, the grapes turn out to be bad....wild, says the passage.

And this is when this classic love song turns into a classic country song. For the vineyard owner is devastated at having been so scorned and disappointed by the beloved vineyard. What more could I have done, wails the vineyard owner! Why, why, why has my love gone bad? And then, before the next teardrop can fall, as Ronnie Millsap would have sung it.....the classic country song turns into classic rap, hip-hop.

So yo,, since you dissed me, cries the vineyard owner, I'mmo take back the hood. Here's the 411 (after which you gonna call 911) I will rip out and devour your hedge, I will break down your walls and trample your land. I will make your body a wasteland, no more tending, no more weeding, no more pruning, and no more rain! You gonna be sorry! Cause, I *expected* justice but saw bloodshed. I expected righteousness but got oppression!

And this is where I get hung up with this text and much of Isaiah and most of the Hebrew Bible, and in fact maybe the whole of the Holy Bible. Can it be that our entire salvation history, the whole story from Abraham to Moses to Isaiah to Jesus – the whole chalupa, - can we chalk the whole story up to God's monumental failure of expectations management?!!!

How can that be? How can it be that God, seer of all souls, hearer of all hearts, knower of all that is seen and unseen – how can God Almighty make such a miscalculation?! How can it be that God so misjudges humanity over such a long stretch of time, over and over again? Not just once in the Garden of Eden, or again in the time of Noah, but with Abraham and Moses and Micah - through the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the 6<sup>th</sup> century, etc, etc., etc.

Why is it that God is forever being disappointed by humanity? If you were God, wouldn't you get with the program and lower your expectations? Why is God always being disappointed? I mean God must have heard that old adage about the silk purse and the sow's ear. And yet, God continues to plant the vineyard and the fruit continues to grow....wild.

However, if we take a closer look at this morning's passage in Isaiah, specifically at the last verse, I think we might get a clue to this mystery. *God expected justice, but saw bloodshed ;righteousness, but saw iniquity!* Now, in the original Hebrew, the words translated here as justice and bloodshed are amazingly similar. You might think they would be totally different, but no. And that may seem like a mild oddity, except that the words for righteousness and iniquity are equally similar to each other. Where we might expect diametrically opposed roots, we get similar constructions. Very strange., the closeness of these opposing words. Too close, in fact, for comfort. So perhaps these

words are so close, because the concepts are so very slightly delineated. That is, perhaps there is just a fine, fine line between justice and injustice, righteousness and inequity.

And if the line is so very fine, perhaps it is not unreasonable to hope for the best. Perhaps we are so close to achieving the impossible, to living into God's dream for justice and righteousness, that hope can never be abandoned. Perhaps God knows this. Perhaps, with time, and remember, we are talking in this morning's reading about a vineyard that grows over the span of generations, not over the span of a few days or weeks or months or even years. This good fruit take a long time. We are talking about cultivating a vineyard, not a chia pet.

A story.

Long ago in ancient Ethiopia a woman married a widower who had a son. And the son refused to love his new stepmother. He was angry. He was cruel. He was even abusive. And after some time, the distraught stepmother decided to seek the help of a wise old hermit who lived in a nearby mountain cave. And she related her situation to the hermit and begged him for a potion that might make her stepson love her. And the hermit thought for a bit, and shook his head and said that he would agree to help her, but that such a potion would require some ingredients that might be very difficult, not to mention dangerous to obtain. He said that in order for him to help her, she would first have to bring him the whisker of a living lion.

The woman left the hermit in dire distress, as you might imagine. She was overwhelmed by the daunting nature of her task...next door to impossible some might say. But she was steadfast, unwilling to give up. And so that night when her family went to sleep, she crept out of the house and went to the edge of the village with a bowl of raw meat. She knew that a great lion lived among the rocks not far from the village. And so she walked toward his lair until she heard his mighty roar. And hearing the roar, she dropped the bowl of meat and ran home as fast as she could. The next night she again crept out of her house and walked into the desert until she could see the form of the lion on the rocks in the distance. And she laid down the meat and ran home. Every night for three years she repeated this ritual. And every night she got a bit closer to the lion before she dropped the meat. Finally one night, she put the bowl down and stepped back. This night she did not run away. She watched the lion emerge from the shadows, and the lion ate slowly from the bowl as he had every night for three years. The woman did not move. The lion finished his meal and returned to the bush. And so the next night she placed the bowl on the ground and did not step back. The lion came forward and began to eat. And as he did the woman reached out her hand and began to stroke the lion's fur. And the lion began purr. And as the lion

ate and purred, and ate and purred, and ate and purred, the woman pulled out a pair of sewing sheers and snipped a single whisker from the lion's chin.

The woman, elated, ran to the hermit to deliver the whisker straightaway. "I've got it! I've brought you the whisker from a living lion," she exclaimed. "You have indeed," said the hermit as he took it from her hand. He examined it intently and immediately dropped it in the fire. "What are you doing?!" she cried. "That is the whisker for the potion! Do you have any idea how difficult it was to get that whisker! I have spent months of my time and kilos of my family's meat winning the trust of that lion!" And of course the hermit replied, "can the love and trust of a child be any harder to earn than that of a wild beast? Go home and cultivate that relationship."

The line between justice and injustice, good fruit and bad fruit, what is possible and what is impossible – is so amazingly small....that we must never give up on us. God doesn't. For hundreds of thousands of years God has hoped and dreamed and trusted that one day.....we will cross that fine line....one day we will bring home the whisker. And this is what the prophet is calling us to do – cross that fine line and cultivate a relationship with God the way we might procure a whisker from a living lion. Patiently. Relentlessly. Wholeheartedly. And over time, fearlessly.

And so broken and wild as we are, we must keep remembering that God is with us and will never abandon us, will never give up on us, will always, no matter how far we fall, be hopeful and present in our lives

As Michael Leunig says, "we are each and all lying in the gutter, and that is why we must never forget to look at the stars."

Amen.

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