

In the mid 8th century BCE, it was a lousy time to be an Israelite. The kingdom has been divided into Northern and Southern factions. Neither of them is militarily strong enough to defend themselves from the Assyrians.

The Assyrians had been the big bully neighbor on the northern and eastern borders for a while, but you can see on this map that they move on down the coast, swallowing up Israel and Judah. They eventually move all the way down into Egypt. And their particular way of maintaining political stability was to dislocate people. They sent the inhabitants of the lands they conquered back to Assyria.

How, as a people who made a covenant with the Lord to be the Lord's people and to live in the Lord's Promised Land, how do you reconcile what you know to be true of yourself with the reality of exile? Remember that for the Israelites, God and real estate are closely related. We still see that today being played out in the Middle East in a way that we in America don't quite understand. If God has given you a land and you then get evicted from that land, what does that say? About God? About the Assyrian Gods? About you? About the future? So the Israelites get escorted out of the Promised Land and into exile by the Assyrians. And it is in this political, economic, and existential crisis that the prophet Isaiah shows up.

Unlike some of the prophets who seem to have come from the margins of society, Isaiah appears to have come from the center. He is from Jerusalem and seemed to be familiar with the inner workings of the Temple, which likely made him a religious professional of some sort. He had access to the palace. And, rather than fighting Assyria with force, Isaiah argued for repentance and trust in divine salvation. Isaiah had a long view of the political reality in which he found himself.

Isaiah's writings are beautiful, which is all the more striking considering the violence and dislocation in which he lived.

"Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning my vineyard."

We begin with a love song. It is easy to forget this is a love song by the time you get to the end, with all of the trampling, devouring, and desolation. This oracle of doom takes place in a love song. Perhaps it is Isaiah's way of reminding his hearers that despite their current situation, they are still characters in a love story with God. The collapse of the Jerusalem economy in no way impacts God's love and concern for Israel.

The owner of the vineyard puts love and care and back-breaking labor into this vineyard. Digging and clearing a field, investing in choice vines and the infrastructure needed to make wine are all signs of the owner's love and of his hope for a future of prosperity.

But, as evidenced by the wild bitter grapes, there is clearly only so much that the owner can do to affect the harvest. What else, he asks, was there for him to do for the vineyard that he had not already done? With that, Isaiah calls the hearers of his message to make their own judgment. If the owner of the vineyard had done everything he could do, who is left to pick up the blame but the plants themselves? “For the vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting.”

While this tactic does have the unpleasant side effect of kicking people who are already down—“Yes, you are in exile and let me also point out that the fault is yours”. It also serves to reassure the people that they aren’t where they are because God has abandoned them. God did not change his mind and get a new people. “You want to know who to blame for this mess you’re in?”, God seems to be asking them, “here’s a mirror.” But when you are in the midst of crisis, it helps to take stock of your responsibility. When you feel you’re hanging on by a thread, it can be helpful to figure out which part of the problem is within your control. What role did you play in getting here and what can you do, now, to get through the day.

In light of the world falling apart around him, Isaiah is wise enough to suggest that our response to God matters. God expects a right response to the love, care, and work that God has put into the people. “He looked for justice but saw bloodshed. He listened for righteousness but heard a cry of oppression,” is another translation of verse 7.

While the Israelites can’t immediately change the reality of the crisis, they can start paying attention to justice and righteousness. They can take control of their own behavior. They can turn back to God.

Notice that nowhere in this parable are people invited to assign blame to someone other than themselves. I know that Isaiah wasn’t writing about the financial crisis on Wall Street, exactly. But consider how much time has been spent in the ‘blame game’ this week. If you google “financial crisis blame”, you will come up with 2,070,000 hits on the internet, leading you to articles about who is responsible for the mess we’re in. And I didn’t hear a single voice on the news this week saying, “perhaps we all should have been living within our means and should have been paying more attention to what was happening in the markets.” Politicians were saying, “now is not the time to assign blame, but this wouldn’t have happened had the other guys not done x,y, or z.”

Republicans, Democrats, liberal media, deregulation, taxes, tax cuts, wall street tycoons, risky mortgages, Fannie Mae, Jimmy Carter, community organizers, the list goes on. All of those people or groups were blamed this week.

But Isaiah is having none of that. He doesn’t want to hear any excuses Jerusalem might have to explain its role in the exile. The vineyard didn’t

produce bad grapes because of any external factor. He calls on them to acknowledge their role and to move toward a better relationship with the God who loves them, who created them, who planted and watered and protected them.

Isaiah leaves his audience and leaves us with this question. What kind of fruit are we producing? Righteousness and justice? Or bloodshed and oppression?

The story we read in Matthew today suggests that Jesus was asking the same question in the Temple as Isaiah had asked. As the religious leaders are asking Jesus about authority, Jesus answers their question with a whole different premise. Using the Isaiah text to start out his parable, he begins. "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower..."

You can almost see the audience acting like eager school children around him, wanting to impress the teacher. "Pick me! Pick me! I know this one. It's from Isaiah. We're supposed to be good grapes! Good grapes! Not nasty wild grapes!"

But then the story changes, as Jesus' stories are wont to do. God, the owner of the vineyard becomes an absentee landlord. All of the hands go down.

"Nevermind. I thought I knew where he was going with this," they think to themselves. "But why would God be a landlord? All the peasants I know who work for a landlord all the live-long day, don't have one good thing to say about them. They take every penny earned and they the peasants end up with nothing to show for it. Why would he possibly equate God to a landlord?"

But Jesus is okay with the discomfort we feel when God does not behave as we think God should and he goes on with his adapted vineyard story. Landlord sends slaves to collect the harvest, but the slaves are killed. So he sends more slaves. Same thing. Then the landlord sends his only begotten son.

Hmmm...why does that sound familiar?

Oh yeah, *Jesus*.

But now it takes an even bigger twist. Because the tenants decide that by killing the heir, they will become the new heirs.

Now where does that ever work out? Any economic system you know of?

The tenants on this vineyard seem to be operating on a false assumption. This land is not theirs. The harvest is not theirs. The labor is not even theirs.

And Jesus, like Isaiah, calls the priests in the temple to pronounce judgment on themselves. "Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

They answer: “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

I think parts of their answer are correct. Their answer acknowledges that the next people on that land will also not be the heirs. The mistaken assumption of the wicked tenants—that they could kill the heir and then inherit—is done away with. And I think they are correct that the new tenants will be people who will hand over the produce at harvest. Because I think this is where Jesus is answering the questions about authority.

“You can ask me about authority all day long”, says Jesus, “but let’s talk about your obedience to God’s authority. You walk around this Temple as if you own the place. Who made you the heir?”

It scares me, this Jesus.

He seems 12 feet tall, angry, uncontrollable.

And then he starts quoting scripture. “Have you *never* read in the scriptures?”, he asks the people who read scripture professionally. This is angry Jesus.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. . . .therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom.”

I would love to wrap this parable up in a bow and present it to you, neatly explained.

But I won’t be doing that.

Because I’m left with more questions than answers.

I wonder why Jesus would cast God as a vacant landlord.

I wonder about a part of the crowd’s answer. They said that the wretches should be put to a miserable death. And maybe that is what Jesus means when he says the kingdom will be taken away from them. But Jesus then goes on to say, “The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.” So, I wonder. Who is the “one”?

In previous readings, I had always figured that if Jesus was the cornerstone, then the ones who got crushed would be the “wretches”. And maybe that’s it. But, this week, as I was thinking about World Communion that we’re about to celebrate, it occurred to me that this life-giving meal is available to us because Jesus, in dying on a cross, was broken to pieces. What more was there to do for God’s vineyard than God had already done? Death was crushed under a stone that rolled away from a tomb, leading us to new life.

So, I wonder if God’s mysterious justice means that the wretches don’t suffer a miserable death after all. Perhaps Jesus’ parable, like Isaiah’s, is also a love song.

And, finally, I wonder about the new tenants. Who are they? Are they people to whom we would never rent? Who have we not invited to join us here in this room, at this table?

Or are we the new tenants? If so, are we producing the fruits of the kingdom? Are we speaking up for justice? Are we leading people to know God's love in the things we do and say?

This week, I invite you to look both for new tenants who may have been invited to join us in the harvest, and also for signs of the fruit of the kingdom in our own lives. Around this table, we will gather. The grapes at this table are good grapes. And we have been invited to enjoy the harvest.

Like the vineyard, this table does not belong to us. It is the Lord's Table. And due to the mysterious justice and grace of God, we have been invited to the feast.

Thanks be to God. Amen.