

WHAT GOD IS GROWING

Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5

PENTECOST 23

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On this third Sunday in November, when we begin to gather collected food items around the base of our free-standing altar, and those planning Thanksgiving dinner scan supermarket flyers for the best sales, we hear from the Narrative Lectionary two prophecies from the Prophet Isaiah. The first is a metaphoric poem of judgment, and the second, an oracle of future hope. In our first passage from the Fifth Chapter, Isaiah re-composes a love song into a lament over the nation of Judah's betrayal of God's principles. Even God, the vine-dresser, questions what is growing in a garden intended to be sweet grapes.

Before addressing this question and moving on to hear what God has in store for His beloved people, let me acquaint you with prophets and their prophecies, in our case, Isaiah. From the time Israel takes its place among the Middle or Near Eastern kingdoms of its time, God raises up and sends an extraordinary number of prophets from varying backgrounds to remind its houses of their true purpose and mission of God's people. The prophets delivered God's oracles, commands, judgments and promises. They yelled, they wept, they rebuked, they soothed, they challenged, and they comforted. Sixteen of these prophets wrote what they spoke. They made up the second major portion of the Hebrew Scriptures, known to the Jews as the *Nevi'im*, and to us, as The Prophets. The Prophets contain two groupings — the four major prophets, followed by the twelve minor prophets. They comprise the section from Isaiah to Malachi in our Bibles. These sixteen Hebrew prophets provide the help we so badly need if we are going to stay alert and knowledgeable, regarding the conditions in which we cultivate faithful and fruitful lives before God. For the ways of the world — its assumptions, its values, its methods of going about its work — are never on the side of God. Or, at least, they rarely are.

We don't read many pages into The Prophets before realizing there is nothing easygoing about them. Prophets were not popular figures. They never achieved celebrity status. The unrelenting reality is that prophets don't fit into our way of life. For a people who are accustomed to fitting God into our lives, or, as we like to say, "making room for God," the prophets are hard to take and easy to dismiss. The God of whom the prophets speak is far too large to fit into our lives. If we want anything to do with God, we have to fit into God.

Basically, the prophets did two things. First, they worked to get people to accept the worst, not as religious catastrophe or political disaster, but as God's judgment, and that, not as punishment, but as a way of getting things right. It can only be embraced, not denied or avoided, for God only intends our good and salvation. So, judgment, because it is God's judgment, while certainly not what we human beings anticipate in our planned future, can never be the worst that can happen. We can see it as part of God's way of setting things right again, for it is the work of God to set the world, and us, right.

The second major work of the prophets was to get people who were beaten down to open themselves up to hope in God's future. To get them on their feet again. In the wreckage of exile, death, humiliation, and sin, the prophets ignited the hope of opening people's eyes to a new work of salvation that God is working toward at all times and places.

This morning, we hear from the Prophet Isaiah, the first of the Major Prophets. In the two combined passages that were read, Isaiah combines these two proscribed works of prophets. The first four chapters of the Book of Isaiah prepare us for today's readings. God's initial judgment is introduced at the outset. In Chapter One, verses two and three, Isaiah declares:

***"Hear, o heavens, and listen, o earth; for the Lord has spoken.
I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled
against Me.***

***The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know, My people do not understand"*** (1:2-3).

These two verses provide the basic theme of Isaiah's prophecy — an affirmation of Yahweh's generous attentiveness (v. 2b), and in indictment of an unresponsive, recalcitrant Israel (v.3).

The call to heaven and earth is a summons of cosmic witnesses to observe the mess that has become of the relationship with "My people." Yahweh has been a caring, attentive parent, who brought Israel into adulthood. The two verbs, "**reared**" and "**brought up**" suggest nurture that brought a small, weak, and vulnerable child to full strength and maturity. Yahweh has done His job as a parent.

By contrast, Israel is completely responsible for its breach with God. To put it simply, Israel "rebelled." Israel has refused to become an adult. Yahweh's relationship to Israel is like that of an owner of an ox or a donkey. The animal is completely dependent, and the owner is completely reliable. Like a donkey, Israel is dumb to its own condition. Unlike a knowing donkey, Israel will starve to death by rejecting its Master. What a way to begin a book of the Bible!

Our assigned passage from the Narrative Lectionary articulates a long history between Yahweh and Yahweh's beloved, that begins in affection and tenderness, but ends in judgment and punishment in the form of exile. Isaiah describes Israel's failure in the form of a poetic love song between the owner and the planter and his beloved vineyard. The landowner is deeply devoted to the vineyard, and showers upon it rich attentiveness and much hard work, doing all the things to maximize the vineyard's productivity. The attentiveness of God for God's people and land is voiced in the action verbs, "**dug, cleared, planted, built, hewed out.**"

We are surprised, however, that the last verb is "**expect.**" That is, the lavish care given to the vineyard is not impersonal and disinterested. The vineyard owner expects something in return for all the effort. The owner expects good, sweet, mature fruit. That is the purpose of a vineyard. Tersely, we are told that the vineyard owner is disappointed, for all that came from his lavish care are

unwanted wild grapes. The owner's ardor is spent. The vineyard has failed. The relationship is in deep jeopardy, for the owner has given up on his vineyard.

The owner now speaks again in a different tone. Now we hear a series of verbs, negative verbs, that undo the constructive effect of the former verbs. In verses five and six, the verbs are ***“remove, break down, make waste, command, as in a drought.”*** Moreover, these verbs, which concern the withdrawal of care and protection, permit a second series of verbs to appear: ***“be devoured, be trampled, not be pruned or hoed, be overgrown.”*** The vineyard, which was protected and cared for, is now exposed and vulnerable, to be damaged irreparably. Everything for the vineyard depends upon the owner, who is now completely alienated and uncaring. The outcome of this poem is to present a picture of a garden now completely abandoned. That is the Southern Kingdom of Judah, carried into exile, abandoned, left to its own inadequate resources.

Today's second passage from Isaiah performs the prophetic task of providing or building hope. This familiar and eloquent passage of promise, that we normally read during Advent, begins with, of all things, a stump, the remnants of a tree that was once chopped down. The context is a deep failure of the Davidic Dynasty, the one that carried the hopes of Judah. And now, in the face of that spent hope, Isaiah asserts new growth with a sprout, a faint sign of life and possibility. This promissary oracle articulates the coming of a new royal figure, who will positively represent the intended best in royal power, all that the Davidic kings heretofore had failed to accomplish. The explanation offered for this future royal power is ***“the Spirit of the Lord”*** (v. 2).

For me, the promise of Isaiah, Chapter Eleven, was important to read and study for my sermon preparation. Last Monday, at our South Shore Cluster Pastors' Meeting, our new Cluster Counselor, Pastor Jeff Elliott, referred to a study conducted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church's Office of Research and Evaluation, forecasting that, as a denomination, the ELCA will have fewer than 67,000 members in 2050, with fewer than 16,000 in weekly worship on an average

Sunday by 2041. That's right, according to current trends, our Lutheran denomination will cease to exist within the next generation. Have we become Isaiah's vineyard?

We live in the modern West, where God isn't necessary to live a good life. We are supposed to discover our own meaning, purpose, and identity. Faith may help, but it's only optional. We, The Church, have quit inviting people to worship, and have not turned members into ministers. We don't know God's story, and we have become out of practice in telling it. For most people, family, career, money, and leisure come before God.

Beloved people of God, we have heard various words of judgment from the likes of Isaiah's oracles, and the ELCA's analytics. Trying to reverse God's will was pointless to Isaiah. The same can be said about our predicament today. It is better for us to get clear on what God's promises in Christ are for us, and find ways to become bearers of those promises. The early Christians saw of promised root of Jesse sprout into Christ, and they lived during times of great tribulation and persecution. Somehow, they grew and thrived. May the Spirit still be with us!

AMEN