

Grape Expectations

When we read the gospel there's always supposed to be Gospel in it, right? Good news! Do these readings from Isaiah and Matthew feel like good news to you? Several of us at the Bible study Wednesday evening were dubious...

Isaiah's parable (or allegory) of the vineyard is the prophet's way of warning the people of Judah. They had not upheld the covenant by which God asked them to live in ways that would bring justice and righteousness. Instead, they produced bloodshed and cries. And God was not happy. God was disappointed, grieving and angry. Continuing to use the parable, Isaiah boldly spoke for God, AS God, using God's voice in the first person. The prophets often described God as having human emotions... disappointment, grief, loneliness, anger, impatience, etc. Here, Isaiah portrayed a jealous, petulant God who vowed to step *away* from the beloved vineyard, the people of Judah, and allow them to suffer the consequences of their own disobedient choices.

God had worked *so* hard to make sure they had everything they needed to produce good fruit! There was all that digging and clearing, planting and tending, protecting and hewing, creating, providing... there was nothing more that God could have done to ensure that the grape harvest would be plentiful – God had “grape expectations”! (I didn't make that up – I read it on a web site.) http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=162 But the problem with the vines in this story was that they had choice – they could choose whether or not to respond to the vinedressers' care. And in Isaiah's story, they chose to produce rotten, sour grapes. The Hebrew is translated “wild”; we would understand it as rotten or bitter... the opposite of plump, juicy and sweet. And so, the gardener decided to leave those wild grapevines to their own devices. God's expectations of the “covenant people” were to see them produce justice “by treating others with honesty and equity – but instead, they allowed the political and economic powers to divide the people and prey upon the poor”, thereby producing bloodshed. God expected righteousness, but heard the cry of the oppressed and downtrodden instead. (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, pg. 124)

From the prophetic reading we move to the Gospel where Jesus, realizing that he had very little time left in which to bring people along with his divine vision of God's kingdom coming on earth, had walked directly and knowingly into the heart of Jerusalem – the Temple – the mouth of the lion, as it were.

“The gospel reading from Matthew depends on Isaiah's text” (<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1510-the-vineyard>) and on Jesus' hearers recognizing it right away. Jesus draws in his listeners by starting this story with one they've heard before... from Isaiah. “There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.” There the original story stopped. But that's all he needed; he already had them hooked! Then, suddenly, he's talking about tenants of the land – those who are leasing the land from the landowner. It is now *these* folks' task to carry on the efforts of the landowner and create a nurturing environment where the vines have every opportunity to

produce good fruit. But in Jesus' story, things go from bad to worse! The tenants are wicked, violent, selfish and focused on stealing the land in the ridiculous hopes of snatching it out from under the landowner... as if the landowner won't respond to their murderous, lecherous behavior.

Of course, that was Jesus' point. Those who'd been given responsibility for the welfare of the vineyard and the producing of good fruit had completely lost sight of their assignment. And Jesus was angry, disappointed, grieving.

So, have you heard any Gospel yet? Any good news? When octogenarian Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes about preaching the connection between these two texts he writes, "Preaching into (the reality of these texts) is hugely urgent. The health and well-being of our civil society is dependent on preaching...(and it's) as hard a time of preaching as I know about." Great. Still looking for the good news. (<http://workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3348>) "Martin Luther once said that sometimes you have to squeeze a biblical passage until it leaks the gospel." (<http://www.davidlose.net/2-14/09/pentecost-17a-crazy-love>) Let's keep squeezing.

There is good news in the crazy, long-suffering, unreasonable, ridiculous love and mercy of the landowner. God continues to search for good and faithful tenants. God takes away the vineyard from those who will not abide by the covenant – those who try to make the land produce for them, personally – for their own gain, rather than make the land produce the good fruit of justice and righteousness for everyone to partake in.

Because *that's* what the kingdom looks like! That's the covenant! It's what God was talking about through the prophet Isaiah and it's the same message coming through the prophet Jesus.

The good news is that God is still looking for good and faithful tenants for the vineyard. When those who claim to be the current tenants (much like those in Jesus' day) use religion and its language, falsely, to create a mirage of "faithfulness", when they make laws designed to benefit their own continued accumulation of wealth, rather than working at ways to equitably share wealth. When they use their words to antagonize and irritate rather than move towards kindness and mercy. When the current tenants of the vineyard use their power to oppress and divide people, creating fear and mistrust rather than cultivating sweet grapes of right relationships and justice. When they will not respond to human need and crises out of their inability to show mercy and walk humbly, then God, the patient landowner, will allow them to reap the bitter, sour, wild grapes and the destructive consequences of their own choices.

And God will continue to search for good tenants, responsible stewards of the vineyard – those who will nurture and tend the vines for the purpose of growing sweet, plump, juicy, good fruit that may be enjoyed by all the inhabitants of the land. The good news is that God will continue to have grape expectations – may WE respond to God's call and *be* the tenants God seeks.

Time for Children...

Last Sunday I brought strawberries – does anyone remember why? (read a story about the Cherokee people first came to discover strawberries...)

Today I brought grapes! (Pass them around) Each of you can take a small bunch.

Did you know the Bible talks a lot about grapes!? And grapevines and the vinedressers? What's that? So... grapes grow on vines, plants that look like this (photo). And they require a lot of work, a lot of care. The vinedresser, or gardener, has to trim the plants... they tear away the leaves at certain times so the sun gets to the forming grapes at just the right time to help them ripen. So there's a lot of pruning and tearing and fussing with the grape vines to make sure they produce the best grapes.

Why do you suppose the Bible talks so much about grapes?

What are some things you can do with grapes or make out of grapes? (Wine!)

Have you ever bitten into a grape that wasn't very good? What does it taste like? What does it make your mouth do? What kind of wine would those grapes make?

Nathan and I already read one passage from the Bible – from the Psalm – that talked about grapes. We're going to read two more! You listen and see what you can learn about grapes and grapevines.