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Background

Scholars believe that this passage from Isaiah was written during the period of Assyrian expansion. The people of Jerusalem, to whom Isaiah spoke, would have seen the Assyrian armies on the move, first toppling Aram, which is modern-day Syria, and then continuing on toward Jerusalem. The people of Judah, however, seemed to be certain of their favor in God's eyes, and believed that God would never allow the Assyrian army to take Jerusalem. But Isaiah, who spoke the word of the Lord, did not speak to them words of comfort or confidence. Rather, Isaiah reminded the people that the covenant that the Lord had made with them was a mutual covenant. God would bless them and make them to prosper, so that they would be a blessing to others. God's people would show forth God to the world by their living – living in justice and righteousness. Isaiah proclaimed again and again that if they continued to neglect their calling to justice and righteousness, then God would not hold back the coming assault. And so the entirety of the book of Isaiah up until this point has been a series of oracles foretelling doom and destruction. And then comes Chapter 5, when Isaiah shares a love song. At least he *says* that it is a love song.

I have asked for a little help with my sermon. You see, this passage of scripture is known as one of the most sophisticated pieces of literature in the Bible. So I think it might be helpful to hear it once again, but also to pause and reflect on it.

*Let me sing for my beloved.*

I can almost imagine the people listening to Isaiah, after hearing those first words of the reading, saying, "Oh, thank heavens! A song. I was getting so tired of all that gloom and doom. I know, I know, things are bad, but I really get overwhelmed by all the negativity, and I think we could all use a little ditty to lighten things up."

*Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard*

Wine was a vital part of life in Isaiah's culture. Water was scarce, rainwater that was gathered in cisterns, and rivers that flowed naturally often became polluted and unsafe to consume. Wine, then, was the common drink. Apparently there are 9 different words used in the Bible that we simply translate into English as wine.<sup>1</sup>

*My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.*

It takes at least three years for a vine, once it is planted, to mature and be ready to harvest. The scripture describes the care and nurture of the beloved vineyard owner. He chose a good spot. Apparently, the topography of a hill provides ideal growing conditions for wine grapes. The altitude of a hill can protect grapes against sudden frosts which occur in a valley, frost which can kill an entire crop. Also, the slope provides for good drainage of both air and water down the hill, and prevents excess moisture from accumulating as in the valley below.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines;*

Some of the stones that had to be removed might have been very big, requiring great effort to be dug out and then removed from the vineyard proper. Perhaps some of these stones were used to build the wall that surrounded the vineyard, keeping it from being devoured by the wild animals always on the hunt for food.

*....he built a watchtower in the midst of it,*

A watchtower was usually made of large stones without any mortar, and on top of that stone structure was a hut roofed with branches. From this vantage point the vineyard could be overlooked and watched, another form of protection against intruders.

The vineyard owner would tend the grapes by carefully pruning the vines, cutting them back so that each vine could receive enough sunlight and airflow so that the fruit would be sweet and healthy. This would usually be done in the winter.<sup>3</sup> In the summer, the vineyard owner would hoe and break up the ground several times after the rains.<sup>4</sup>

*(He) hewed out a wine vat in it;*

When it came time to harvest, the wine was expressed on the spot, every vineyard possessing its own winepress. The winepress consisted of two vats, hewn one below the other out of the solid rock, on the slope of the hill. The two were connected by holes bored through the rock, so that, as the grapes were put in and pressed down, the juice streamed into the lower vat, there to be collected in jugs to ferment.<sup>5</sup>

This whole process, foreign to a city girl like me, and perhaps like you, would have been as common an experience to Isaiah's community as beltway traffic is to ours. So the listeners would have recognized that the beloved vineyard owner was a good, responsible vineyard owner, one that should be able to expect that this vineyard Isaiah described would yield good, sweet, juicy grapes.

*he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes."*

This is an unexpected turn. After all the care, all the nurture, all the, well, love that the beloved showed his vineyard, this vineyard, Isaiah shares, yielded wild grapes –perhaps the grapes were small, sour, dry. And the surprises continue, for Isaiah goes on in this passage with language of judgment, language that would have sounded to Isaiah's listeners, a lot like a court case.

*And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem, and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.*

This is where Isaiah's listeners may have started to get suspicious, "Hold on, you can't press charges against a vineyard. What is going on?"

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

"Um. Sounds like you did everything you could. Don't think you left anything out. Good soil, check, good hill, check, wall, watchtower, winepress – check, check, check. Sounds like you did everything you could.

*When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?*

"I don't know. There should be grapes. Should be fruit that is sweet and plump and rich.

<sup>5</sup> *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.*

“Well, okay, as a vineyard owner, that’s your prerogative. I mean, it might seem a little excessive to me, but you can do what you want to do. But it does sound like it hasn’t been working out for you. Maybe it is better to move on. Maybe this love song ends with a break up.

*<sup>6</sup> 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.*

“Hold on, no one can command the rains except for God. Isaiah, I don’t like where this is heading. I am starting to get the feeling that we aren’t talking about a regular vineyard owner. And that I might be one of the grapes. Man I never liked poetry. Metaphors always confuse me.”

*<sup>7</sup> For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;* This love-song is no respite from the judgment of the people of Israel. Isaiah is still speaking of the characteristics that are to mark the community of the people of God.

*he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;*

Justice. Justice basically meant that things are supposed to be fair. When scales are used in the market place, they are to be fairly balanced. Those who have land are not to use their wealth to deprive others of a place to live. Advantages that privilege those who already have much, that is not justice.

This one, I have to admit, hits close to home. This week a new study was released on the enduring racial wealth disparity. The study found that in the last three decades, the average wealth of white families grew by more than 80%, which is triple the average gains of black families. The report said that if the status quo does not change and current economic trends continue, it will take more than two centuries for the average black household to accumulate the same amount of wealth as an average white family. It is a legacy of the injustice upon which our nation was founded.<sup>6</sup> He expected justice but saw bloodshed indeed.

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

Righteousness is an expectation that the people will act in the ways that God, God’s very self would act - with steadfast love and kindness, mercy and grace, showing compassion for the widow and the orphan the refugee and the immigrant the poor and marginalized. These are the hallmarks of the people of God.

It is why we decided several years ago to start the Welcome Table, so that we could put another leaf in the table because honestly, we have so much that we can share. But for these and other ministries of compassion, we always seem to be scrambling to make sure we can cover all that needs to be done.

This is a tough text to hear, for one like me who is so privileged, one like me, who can shut out the pain and the prejudice of the world when it gets to be too much. Who can choose when I talk about race, who can decide when I will care for the poor, who knows that the person I chose to wed is acceptable in the eyes of others, who can shut my front door and dwell secure in my home in my safe community. Maybe it is tough text for some of you to hear as well.

But for others - for those who suffer under the weight of injustice; those who do not know where their next meal will come from; those who fear for the lives of their children; those who feel they cannot share with the world who they really love, or who they really feel they are inside; those who

do not feel safe in their home or community, perhaps because of chemical explosions falling from on high, or because danger comes when the house is locked up and dark - I realize that for them, this *is* a love song. For this song sings of a God who will not be silent in the face of injustice. This song sings of a God who will not abide wickedness. This song sings of a God who will do something about it. For those who suffer, this is not a tough text, but for those in despair, this is music to the ears. Maybe it is for some of you as well.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Jesus sang the song of justice and righteousness in the living of his life. He sang the song to the judgment hall and to the cross and to the tomb. The resurrected Christ was given voice to sing it anew. And that song - that love song of righteousness and justice - that song Christ gave to us to sing as well, whether it is a song that brings us hope and sustenance, or a song that makes us uncomfortable and afraid. But, my brothers and sisters, if we sing it true: if we sing with our lives the righteousness that God intends, if we sing as a community the justice that God longs for, then I believe that the Holy Spirit will work in us, wonders beyond what we can imagine. And I trust that if we learn to sing the love song of justice and righteousness, then we will not be able to help it, but we will come to love its song in us. We will come to bear good fruit.

After all, we have been planted by the Creator in such good soil. We have been guarded in Christ with such fierce love. We have been nurtured by the Spirit with such tender care. How could the song end any differently?

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<sup>1</sup>"Vineyards and Winepresses," Brigham Young University  
<http://emp.byui.edu/satterfieldb/ancient%20israel/vineyards%20and%20winepresses.htm>

<sup>2</sup> "Wine 101: Educating Wine Lovers about Oregon Wines"  
<http://www.oregonwines.com/wine101.php?SectionID=3&FaQID=26>

<sup>3</sup> Wes Hagen, "Pruning Tips: Backyard Vines." <https://winemakermag.com/571-pruning-tips-backyard-vines>

<sup>4</sup> "Vineyard and Grape Pressing" [http://www.lifeintheholyland.com/vineyard\\_grape\\_pressing.htm](http://www.lifeintheholyland.com/vineyard_grape_pressing.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Reema Khrais and Lizzie O'Leary, Discussion of Study by the Institute for Policy Studies and Incorporation for Enterprise Development Study, Marketplace Weekend, NPR Podcast, August 12, 2016.