

A LOVE SONG
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Text: Isaiah 5:1-7

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 watchtower 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!

Isn't it funny how we take things for granted over time? What made us happy and got us excited yesterday today is just old news. There was actually a study done on this a few years ago. Researchers looked at consumer satisfaction and found that when we buy a new outfit, or a new television, or a new car, or whatever, the newness quickly wears off, and we adjust our expectations upward.

So we go out and buy a new Toyota, and we think it's the most beautiful car in the world. We can't stop admiring it every time we open the garage door. But then we get used to it, and it doesn't seem quite as special anymore. And then one day we look at that Toyota and think, *What would really be beautiful is a new Lexus.*

Personally, I don't know why we need a study to tell us that. It seems pretty obvious to me. We appreciate what we have less and less the longer we have it. Things lose their sparkle, and we don't enjoy them or value them the way we used to. And I don't just mean material things. I mean people and relationships, too. We take them for granted over time, as well—including, and perhaps most of all, our relationship with God, like we see in the reading from Isaiah this morning.

The backstory is, God has taken care of Israel for a long time. God has provided Israel with everything it needs. And the whole time, God has had one simple desire—that people would learn to treat each other the way God treated them. That's all the thanks God wanted. *I've been good to you; you be good to each other. I've given you life; you give each other life. I've loved you with all my heart; you love each other with all your heart.*

That's it. That's all God was hoping for. But instead of responding to God's kindness and generosity, Israel took God completely for granted. Instead of following God's example, people followed their own desires. So when God looked around, instead of justice and righteousness, what did God see? Bloodshed. What did God hear? A cry. People were exploiting each other, abusing each other, even killing each other.

It was a devastating blow to God. Isaiah compares it to a gardener who puts his blood, sweat, and tears into his vineyard in the hopes that it'll yield good fruit. He finds a nice sunny spot with rich, fertile soil. He clears out all the rocks and weeds. He hand-picks the vines. He puts up a tower for protection. He carves out a vat to store all the wine he plans to make. But then, after all that, the vineyard turns out to be a total bust. Instead of sweet, delicious grapes, the gardener ends up with wild grapes that are so bitter they set his teeth on edge.

So Israel turns out to be a major disappointment to God just like the vineyard turns out to be a major disappointment to the gardener. People don't give a darn about God. They don't care about what God has done for them. They don't have any sense of gratitude, and they don't feel any obligation to change. And God isn't happy about it, judging by what the gardener does to the vineyard. In a fit of rage, he tears down everything he built and lets the land go back to nature. He undoes all the work he did and basically erases any sign that the vineyard was ever there. He utterly destroys it.

And the point seems to be that God is going to do the same thing to Israel. God is going to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. Which is a pretty terrifying thought. Is that who God is? Is that what God's capable of? If we don't live up to God's standards, if we push God's patience too far, is God going to go ballistic on us?

It's hard not to wonder.

But if we go back to the beginning of the reading, Isaiah gives us a pretty clear signal that there's a deeper way to think about all this. In the very first verse, he frames the whole passage as a love song. "Let me sing for my beloved," he says, "my love-song concerning his vineyard." And in any good love song, there's going to be some hurt, and there's going to be some anger. C. S. Lewis said anger is what love bleeds when you cut it. But there's also going to be hope, and reconciliation, and new understanding.

So I don't see this as a story about a vengeful God, who goes on a genocidal rampage. I see it as a portrait of a relationship. And the thing we all know about relationships is, they get messy. We aren't always good to each other. Sometimes we take each other for granted. Sometimes we act out of woundedness. But we can work through our issues, our clashes. We can move past bitterness and resentment. We can learn to listen and forgive. We can find humility and compassion. We can change and grow. And we can end up closer than we were before.

How that happens, I don't know. I can only tell you it does.

It's like this one passage I read sometimes at weddings. I came across it years ago, and I've always loved it. It's by Madeleine L'Engle, and it's about the longevity of her own marriage and all the disappointments she and her husband have survived and that somehow have strengthened their love.

"No long-term marriage is made easily," she writes, "and there have been times when I've been so angry or so hurt that I thought my love would never recover. And then, in the midst of near despair, something has happened beneath the surface. A bright little flashing fish of hope has flicked silver fins and the water is bright and suddenly I am returned to a state of love again—till next time.

"I've learned that there will always be a next time, and that I will submerge in darkness, but that I won't stay submerged. And each time something has been learned under the waters; something has been gained; and a new kind of love has grown.

"The best I can ask for is that this love, which has been built on countless failures, will continue to grow. I can say no more than that this is mystery, and gift, and that somehow or other, through grace, our failures can be redeemed and blessed."

So what we can take from Isaiah this morning is the knowledge that God isn't some cold, impersonal deity, who rules our lives through cosmic laws and never engages with us directly—never comes down from the mountain, so to speak. God is a living being, who loves us more than we can imagine and wants nothing more than to be actively involved in our lives. And that makes God vulnerable. That exposes God to pain. When we push God away, when we replace God in our hearts with our own desires, when we reject the life God offers us and choose instead a life of selfishness, God is devastated, as any person would be, and maybe for a nanosecond God thinks, *Are they worth it?*

But the answer is always yes, even in moments like the one we see this morning. Because God never does utterly destroy Israel. God never does rip out the vineyard. As we read on in Isaiah, Israel does experience separation and loss, sorrow and suffering. But God is always there for God's people, and God is always working to bring them home. Amen.