

God's Vineyard

[Isaiah 5:1-7](#)

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Most Mondays on my day off I walk with friends in Sycamore Grove. Then I go to the Livermore Library. I read the bible commentaries in the reference section, I check out books, and often I pick up a used book from the library bookstore. Then I go down the street to my favorite roadside fruit and vegetable stand. It is run by a family from Laos, who grow their own produce in Livermore. It's open all summer. As long as I go in the morning, there is always a great selection of strawberries, peaches, nectarines, summer squash, eggplant, zucchini, and tomatoes. I buy whatever looks good. My car smells wonderful on the drive home past the vineyards. The vines are green and full now. The lush green plants are a pleasing sight against the dry golden hills. Because it's my Sabbath day, I take the time to feast on the colors and the fragrances.

We live in a wonderful valley where gardens are abundant, and each year the grape vines promise a luxurious crop. We have here a Mediterranean climate, just like in the Holy Land. Many of the images in the bible include gardens and vineyards.

The first garden, of course, was the Garden of Eden. God's story begins where rivers flow and fruit trees grow. There God created human beings and promised to give them all they needed. People drank wine in ancient times because it could be preserved in animal skins and in barrels in caves. Wine has always been special because it requires a hot, dry climate, but also water. And so the ancient people of the Mediterranean lands had to figure out ways to collect and direct the water to irrigate the vines. When I was at the Dead Sea, I saw ruins of ancient dwellings with water cisterns, where people collected rainwater long ago.

There at the Dead Sea, scribes copied ancient scrolls, and the people, called the Essenes, lived by the shores of the salt lake in the community of Qumran and there studied the scriptures of the Hebrew faith. In about 66 CE the people had to leave suddenly to escape the Roman army at the time of the Jewish Roman War. It appears that the Essenes put their precious scrolls into clay jars and in haste hid them in caves around the Dead Sea, and then they departed the area. Much later, in 1947, Bedouin shepherds and then archeologists discovered what are now known as the Dead Sea scrolls.

The oldest copy of Isaiah, the Great Isaiah Scroll, was among the scrolls found. Its original writing dates back to 125 BCE.

For both Jews and Christians the Book of Isaiah is one of the most beloved scrolls—now we call them books. Scholars agree that chapters 1-39 were written by one author we now call 1st Isaiah. Our reading today comes from that part of the Isaiah scroll. First Isaiah was a Prophet of the 8th century BCE, during roughly the same time as Amos and Hosea. Amos went from the Southern Kingdom to prophesy in the north. Hosea lived and prophesied in

the north, but Isaiah lived and prophesied in the south, in the Kingdom of Judah. He was a priest and an aristocrat, connected to the royal household of four kings and to the temple in Jerusalem. His ministry spanned nearly 40 years, and his writing was impressive (Camilla Smith, *The Period of the Great Prophets*, 46).

The passage for today from First Isaiah is written as a song that the Prophet would have sung about God, his beloved, who created a vineyard. God prepared the soil, removed the stones and planted only the choicest vines. But the vines grew only poor grapes. God then removed the protective hedge and broke down the stonewall, allowing wild animals to enter the vineyard. It became trampled and overgrown with briars and thorns. And God even commanded the clouds to rain no more over the vineyard. For Isaiah, the vineyard was a picture of what was going on in society. Though God expected justice from the people, he saw bloodshed. Instead of righteousness, God heard only cries and suffering. Verse 7 in the ancient Hebrew has alliteration and could be translated today: God looked for "right" and found "riot," God looked for "decency" and found "despair" (<http://www.lectionarystudies.com/studyot/sunday27aot.html>).

Isaiah explains the metaphor in this passage, when he says: "The vineyard of the LORD of heavenly forces is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are the plantings in which God delighted."

Joanne Sheppard, who painted the four portraits of the great prophets, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, chose her husband Harry as her model for Isaiah. What a compliment! I'll admit, I am a bit biased—because I know Harry, and I have only briefly met the other men in the Sheppard family: Scot, Mitchell, and Roger. But it's perfect that Isaiah is Harry. This is the prophet who studied all the evidence, listened to the rulers and the other prophets, and made serious judgments. Now, if you don't know Harry, I'll tell you, he is a retired judge. His wisdom is still sought in his retirement for arbitration and mediation. I know Harry in committee work and in bible study to be a deep thinker, who listens, and when he speaks, asks probing questions and offers insightful comments. This is Isaiah!

When God called Isaiah, the call came with seraphs flying. (Seraphs are flaming creatures that were thought to inhabit the innermost sanctuary of the temple). As in our call to worship today, God called Isaiah, gave him words to speak, and Isaiah responded humbly, "Send me."

Isaiah's call was to speak truth to power. He could see what was coming. He probably read the prophecies of those who came just before him, Amos and Hosea, prophesying in the north that the people would be doomed—remember how the fruit in the fruit basket would rot if the people did not get their lives in line with Amos's plumb line? Remember how God compared the people to a prostitute, but told Hosea that he should take back his wife Gomer and love her in spite of her ways? The prophets warned the people in the north, that if they did not care for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, they would be doomed. And so Isaiah figured, "No wonder the Assyrian armies invaded the north!" Isaiah feared the same would happen in the south, and so he warned his people to change their

ways. The Assyrians did march south and they destroyed the entire southern kingdom, all but Jerusalem, the Holy City. It wasn't until later, in Jeremiah's time, that Solomon's temple was destroyed and the people were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon in exile.

Prophets speak the words of God, or perhaps we can say they write down the words that God would say, and in the writing, you get a good sense of the prophet's thinking. Isaiah thought like an arbitrator. Isaiah says: "Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD" (Isaiah 1:18). Isaiah portrays a God who is rational. The verse "Come...let us argue it out," has also been translated "Come, let us reason together" (RSV, NIV), let's "talk this over" (NJB), "Let us reach an understanding" (JPS), "Let us set things right (NA), or "Let's settle the matter" (GNB) (Smith, 47). Here is the thoughtful judge, bringing people together with sound judgment. This is our Harry!

In chapter 10, Isaiah speaks an oracle against legislators who write statutes that serve the rich and the powerful at the expense of the poor and the powerless: "Ah you...who write oppressive statutes to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, orphans your prey!" (10:1-2). Isaiah used his authority to speak out against social injustice. He worked to change the laws that were wrong. He was hard on the people, and yet Isaiah always assured them that they were still God's people: "For all [God's] anger...; [God's] hand is stretched out still" (5:25, 10:4).

This is the message of the prophets: God asks a lot of us, but "God's hand is stretched out still"! We are to change the laws that are unjust. Perhaps that means we should work for making it easier to vote in the upcoming election. (In 2012 only 57.5% of eligible citizens voted.) Many argue voting is a right; you shouldn't have to register first. And some districts discriminate against poor people by requiring photo-ID cards and by reducing hours at the polls. We are to pay attention to the people who are poor. Perhaps that means we should work for low-income housing so that people who work here in low-paying jobs might also be able to afford to live here. We are to welcome those who are widowed and alone. Perhaps that means we should provide support groups for people in bereavement and organize free legal assistance to help people navigate retirement, healthcare, and end-of-life issues.

God created a fertile vineyard. We are God's plantings, but we have yielded sour grapes. We are in partnership with God, not to forget. Yes, we are given life, and beauty, and relationship, but we have to make it all work for the common good. And if we don't share our abundance, we face a garden of "the grapes of wrath," "the grapes of [God's] wrath."

You probably remember reading John Steinbeck's book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is the story of the Joad family, who were forced to leave their home in Oklahoma where they were tenant farmers in the Great Depression. It was the time and place in American history we call the Dust Bowl. Poor folks, they head for California. They expect to find jobs in the Central Valley outside of Bakersfield, but end up having to stay in a government migrant camp, not unlike refugee camps around the world today. You read this book and think, "Man alive, they had hard luck." But when you look deeper, you see that Steinbeck is blaming the system. It's not just the drought that forces the Joad family to leave their

home. It's also the agricultural industry changes and bank foreclosures. And in California, it's the big landowners exploiting the farm workers with low wages and not enough jobs to go around. The prophets tell us God's wrath has ruined the vineyard. God "is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored" ("The Battle Hymn of the Republic," UMH 717).

The prophets tell us God is displeased. But Isaiah says, "[God's] hand is stretched out still" (5:25). Here is the promise of salvation. Surely it is God who saves us—from economic plight, from loneliness, from uncertainty, from stress, from life changes. We all have periods of our lives when the grapes are sour.

I heard from a friend whom I hadn't seen in a long time. It appeared he was doing very well. But he told me just before he retired he went to the doctor and after a slew of tests he learned that he had cancer. He spent a year having surgery and chemotherapy. It wasn't the way he expected to start his retirement. He said, "I'm fine now...for now. But something like this changes everything." I asked him what had changed. He said he had a chance to look back over his life and ask himself the question, "Does any of this make the world a better place?" He went on to say, "I used to think I owned my time. Now I don't. Now I'm just trying to do something useful in my life with the time I'm given."

I think that's what God wants us to do, do something useful, be partners in God's vineyard.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, 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). We need to rely on the vine. Many say Jesus was a prophet like Isaiah, who spoke for God. We need to follow the love ethic that Jesus came to teach us. God stretches out a hand to us that we might work together in God's vineyard.