“God as Gardener”

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

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Last week we heard about the troubling situation in the northern kingdom, with Hosea serving as a prophet delivering God’s message to the people.

Today we hear from Isaiah, a prophet serving the south.

He was called by God to speak to the people of Judea, particularly those living near Jerusalem.

What we find is a situation similar to what went on in the north.

The people disobeyed God, causing destruction with their lack of faith.

Today we will hear two passages from Isaiah, both are rather well known.

The first is in chapter 5 verses 1-7. Let us continue to listen for the Word of God

5:1 Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

2 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.

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

4 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?

5 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.

6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briers and thorns;

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

7 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!

…and skipping over to chapter 11 verses 1-5…

11:1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding,

the spirit of counsel and might,

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;

4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,

and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

**This is the Word of the Lord...Thanks be to God.**

A few weeks ago, my husband and I were driving home in the car.

A song came on the radio that caught our attention.

It had a simple acoustic tune, making it easy to hear the lyrics.

We fell silent as we listened.

The song is called “Wasn’t Expecting That” by Jamie Lawson.

It moves through this beautiful love story.

It starts out: “It was only a smile, but my heart it went wild. I wasn’t expecting that.”

The song then moves through the love story between two people.

He sings “I thought love wasn't meant to last, I thought you were just passing through   
If I ever get the nerve to ask, What did I get right to deserve somebody like you?   
I wasn't expecting that”

Tears started to well up in my eyes as we listened.

It was such a sweet song, perfectly describing the joy and wonder of a budding relationship.

The singer goes on about how they were married in spring, had three kids who grew up.

At this point in the song I thought it would be perfect to use for a first dance at a wedding.

But then there’s the ending.

It takes quite a sharp turn, one that I wasn’t expecting.

I suppose the name of the song is appropriate then.

The last stanza goes: “When the nurses they came, Said, "It's come back again"  
I wasn't expecting that  
Then you closed your eyes, You took my heart by surprise   
I wasn't expecting that.”

And then the song ends abruptly on that last line.

It definitely took me by surprise.

I went from teary eyed to wide eyed.

Asking my husband “wait, did he just sing about his wife’s death?”

“Yep, he sure did.” JT responded.

“Oh!” was all I could muster.

It felt so jolting to go from this romantic love story, to a rather tragic ending.

Suddenly I changed my mind about it being a wedding song, realizing it would make all the wedding guests cry!

Now I can’t help but think about that song as I read the first part of our text for this morning.

It too is a love song that starts out sweet.

It tells of this lovely vineyard, carefully created and cared for.

It was planted on a fertile hill, with good prospects.

The gardener loved the vineyard and desired the best for it.

But like that song on the radio I heard in the car, it takes a sad, unexpected turn.

Rather than producing grapes worthy of a fine wine, the vineyard bore only wild grapes.

Too sour to do anything with.

After all that hard work from the gardener, the vineyard was useless.

Unable to do what it was created to do.

Now, this would be a sad song in and of itself.

But then Isaiah reveals the symbolism of the story.

We learn that the gardener in this song is God.

And the vineyard is the people of Judah.

We see that God put so much care into creation and humanity.

Wanting the best lives for all the children of God.

But those children.

They turned away from God’s care and decided to do their own thing.

Isaiah calls the people out for the way they have behaved.

How they have treated one another, how they have committed heinous crimes.

So the fate of the vineyard is grim.

The gardener doesn’t try to prune the vines to start them fresh.

Doesn’t check the Ph level of the soil or try fertilizer.

The gardener decides to destroy the whole thing.

God is so angry, there’s nothing left to do but give up on the people.

God expected them to act with justice, but they responded with bloodshed.

God expected them to act with righteousness, but they responded with selfishness.

They have gone too far and there is no turning them around.

Isaiah declares that destruction is the only solution.

It’s a rather dismal ending to what would have been such a sweet love song.

So then we jump over the chapter 11, where Isaiah proclaims what will happen with the stump of Jesse.

The word stump is intentional here.

Everyone expected the line of Jesse, King David’s father, to flourish.

They thought this royal lineage with thrive throughout history.

But Isaiah declares that this line will be diminished to a stump.

Not a thriving family tree, but a sad little stump, hardly protruding from the ground.

A stump that is unable to produce more life, it is left to rot into the ground.

But suddenly this story takes another unexpected turn.

A shoot shall come out of that stump.

Isaiah reveals that life will in fact spring forth from this seemingly lifeless stump.

A branch shall grow out of those roots.

What had been destroyed will be restored.

This image of life coming out of that lifeless stump reminds me of a video that has been circulating the internet this week.

It’s of a little French boy and his father being interviewed by a reporter.

They are standing outside of the locations where the terrorists attacked Paris last week.

Many people have gathered to hold vigil and mourn the lives lost.

The little boy looks to be about 5 or 6 years old.

The reporter asks him if he understands what has happened in his city.

The boy tells the reporter that there were really, really, really mean people who did this.

Bad guys, he says.

The boy goes on to say that they have to be careful and now they have to move to a new house.

He fears for his safety in the wake of this attack.

His father quickly and gently interjects, telling him they can stay where they are.

France is their home and there is no need to move away.

The boy says, “but there are bad guys and they have guns, daddy.”

His father acknowledges that truth, but tells him there are bad guys everywhere.

His father responds “they may have guns, but we have flowers.”

The boy says, “but flowers don’t do anything. They’re for, they’re for”…he trails off looking at the mounds of flowers on the ground.

His dad says, “Look everyone is putting flowers on the ground. It’s to fight against the guns.”

“To protect?” The boy asks.

“Exactly,” the dad responds.

The boy continues to survey the flowers being placed and the candles being lit.

Suddenly his tenor changes and he confidently tells the reporter that the candles and flowers are there to protect everyone.

The reporter asks the boy if he feels better now.

“Yes, I feel better.” the boy says.

The interview ends with the sense that this boy has gained a sense of security.

And great deal of wisdom in those few minutes.

That boy got to witness a tremendous outpouring of love and community.

Seeing his fellow Parisians responding with grace-filled signs and peaceful actions.

As that father taught his son that day, responding with fear and violence isn’t the answer.

The message in those flowers and candles deliver a much more powerful message.

That those who are hurting in the wake of the attacks will not attack back.

That they won’t hide away in fear.

They boldly stand together on the streets, building altars of love in response to hatred.

Peace in response to warfare.

Out of ashes and despair on those streets in Paris, hope shines through.

The flowers placed on the sidewalks are like that shoot rising out of the stump of Jesse.

Just when it seemed like death and despair was going to have the final say,

A sign of life and salvation appears.

As the boy says, the flowers will protect us.

The branch forming from the roots of Jesse will protect us.

The long awaited Messiah will make it all right.

After all of those years of the people of God fighting against one another.

Tearing the kingdom apart.

A new king appears.

Christ the King takes the throne.

He is the only king that treats the people with righteousness and equity.

He is the one the world had been waiting for, all those centuries with corrupt kings in charge.

With him comes the spirit of wisdom and understanding.

The spirit of counsel and might.

The spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.

He brings a different kind of kingdom.

One the world has never known before.

One that is filled with righteousness and faithfulness.

As we journey through Advent, starting next week, we will prepare our hearts for Christ to come.

This action is twofold.

On the one hand, we celebrate the fact that Christ has already come, those 2000 years ago.

That the shoot indeed rose up out of the stump of Jesse.

But we also use Advent as a time of waiting for him to return.

Waiting for him to complete the work started.

Waiting for righteousness and faithfulness to be the primary languages of the world.

If we pay attention as we wait, we will see this process already at work around us.

When we see those hope-filled flowers on the streets of Paris.

When we recognize the humanity in one another and treat people with love and respect.

When we welcome in the stranger, the poor, the abused, just as Jesus would do.

We see these moments of grace all around us and we can be thankful that God is behind it all, at the center of it all.

That God has not given up on us. And never will.

That God is a faithful Gardener, patiently tending to us, the vineyard.

Hoping we will yield grapes worthy of the finest wine. Amen.