

Long Division

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Lk 12:49-56

Proper 15C St Thomas's Church 2016

This is not the sermon I was originally going to preach.

I was going to begin by telling you to buckle your seat belts -

today's readings are a bumpy ride!

They're tough – and they hit too close to home.

If you weren't in church looking at your bulletin,

you could think the Isaiah reading was written

by an op ed columnist for the NY Times or a news commentator for WNPR,

not a prophet from the 8th c BC!

I was going to fill you in on the background:

Isaiah is not happy with the people of Judah.

He has pointed out in earlier chapters that their lifestyle is corrupt, brazenly sinful.

Social injustice is rampant. Women are routinely harassed and humiliated.

Civil unrest is predicted to become open violence.

Outright rejection of God's leadership has ruined the people.

I was going to riff on how much that sounds like us today...

but we already know that.

So I started again, this time intending to preach on
the love song Isaiah is singing on behalf of his friend.
Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard...
a song of perfect harmonies where all wrong notes have been excised.
The soil is well tilled, the heavy stones cleared out
and premium vines have been planted.
Isaiah's friend for whom he sings has even put a watchtower and a winepress
in the vineyard for its safety's sake.
The preparation for a bountiful crop lacks nothing.
Then – abruptly – the song changes key.
Even with all this care, the field produces only worthless grapes.

I was going to talk about how the prophet's friend is finally revealed
to be none other than God and the people of Judah God's pleasant planting.
I was going to focus on how God expected justice but saw bloodshed;
God expected righteousness but heard a cry!
I was planning to point out
how the people God had created and planted in the world,
the people God expected to be righteous and to practice justice
were doing nothing of the kind.

It seemed that wherever God looked what God saw
was unrighteousness, injustice and the insatiable greed of the rich.
The vines God so carefully planted and tended were crowding out the common people
and leaving no place for the dispossessed.
The “pleasant planting” returned God’s kindness with ingratitude,
God’s goodness with evil.
The further I went down that road, the more hopeless I felt. So I tried again.

This time I went back to the story – but where I picked it up
finally, - in despair, or frustration, or both –
the gardener was threatening to remove the protective hedge around the garden,
break down its all, make it a waste place, withhold rain from it.
God is angry and abandonment is on the vineyard’s horizon.

That led to: what if God abandoned US?

I mean not much has changed. Social injustice is still rampant.
Women - especially in the workplace - are still regularly harassed and humiliated.
Civil unrest regularly erupts in open violence.
Perhaps worst of all, the millions of people living in poverty fly under the radar,
hidden, unmentioned, overlooked.

The NY Times (Fri) stated on the front page

“the US, the wealthiest nation on earth, also abides the deepest poverty of any developed nation.”

The other America is hurting.

I was also going to talk about how the land itself...

the land which God designed to produce beautiful fruit

for the nourishment of the world is running out of fertile space,

running out of water, being destroyed by fires and floods.

Like Isaiah I was going to sing for God – and then call on all of us

to judge between God – and the vineyard.

What else could God have done? Why did this pleasant planting yield wild grapes?

And now have we invited God’s frustration and anger?

Might God abandon us? Another dead end.

The thought of God’s abandonment was too hard even to think about.

And where was THAT sermon going?

We know that as a society we aren’t very good gardeners.

We know need to tend and prune and weed and care for each other

and for those unable to care for themselves.

We know there are suckers that need to be pinched back for good fruit to grow.

But we don't seem to know how to get there.

God may still be singing us a love song – we pray so –

but it seems we can have a love song sung over us endlessly

and still we don't learn. We are wild grapes.

Somehow all those sermons ended up in the ditch of despair.

Then I thought “aha, Jesus is the answer!”

Jesus will fix everything we've broken,

Jesus will still our storms – personal and national.

Jesus is the one who guide our feet into the way of peace

and restore us to harmony.

Eventually maybe...but it seems not today.

Today Jesus comes with fire to bring division amongst.

This is the Jesus who is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild

but the One who comes to bring judgment

who comes to upset our prized status quo in order to establish GOD'S peace.

I didn't sleep much for a couple of nights thinking about all this.

But finally it occurred to me to stop spotlighting the bad news
and put the spotlight on God instead. What is God doing here?

What if we reframe all this as gift and blessing and instead of hearing the blues?

What if we receive Isaiah and Jesus and their uncomfortable words

Will we hear a chorus in the love song God wants to sing to us?

Just when we might be really down and thinking "there is no way"

there is Jesus – present to us – the way, the truth, and the life.

God living among us still.

What IS Jesus doing?

Through his crucifixion he shows us

how divided the world is already between the godly and the godless.

Through his resurrection we can see the possibilities of new life,

the new life of God's kingdom.

He issues us an invitation: Choose this day whom you will serve

and whose values you will claim:

the values of our weedy vineyard or those of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Yes, if we choose Jesus, we may have to say no to some things –
no to defamation and insult and lying and corruption and hate and vilence
and all the mud being publically slung.

Yes, we may even have to say no to our relatives.

Isaiah and Jesus are a mirror in which to see ourselves, but not only that.

They also give us the gift of inspiration,
encouraging us to listen to and hear the cries of the poor,
offering us courage to stand boldly with them for what is right.

As they open our ears to God's love song,
we join in the long line of those whose lives – and deaths –
were spent working to make hope and goodwill the world's default setting,
struggling to be beacons of beauty and joy, bearers of love, even tough love.

Jesus is no respecter of the divisions we create.

He is not on the side of conservatives or progressives, republicans or democrats.

He is on the side of the poor and the marginalized.

With him and with Isaiah, we can stand together for true religion
and become by God's grace the good fruit for the health of the world.

ML King reminds us:

Any religion that...is not concerned with the slums that damn people
the economic conditions that strangle them,
and the social conditions that cripple them is dry as dust religion.

Rev Wm Barber (DNC) goes further:

When religion is used to camouflage meanness
we know we have a heart problem in America...

Some issues are not right v. left or liberal v. conservative.

They are right v. wrong.

We need to embrace our deepest moral values and push for a revival
at the heart of our democracy.

When the heart is in danger, some one with a good heart
will bring a defibrillator to work on the bad heart
because it's possible to shock a bad heart and revive the pulse.

In this season when some want to harden and stop the heart of our democracy
we are called to be the moral defibrillator of our time.

We must shock this nation with the power of love.

We must shock this nation with the power of mercy.

We must shock this nation and fight for justice for all.

That's the sermon I believe God wants preached.

Isaiah and Jesus have given us a gift if we will listen.

They have gotten our attention and can help us to focus not just on ourselves but on God Godself, the One who loves us and sings to us and calls to us to help make this world a better place.

If you hear God's love song from Isaiah,

if you hear the fire in Jesus's words,

if you hear the truth in the words of Wm Barber, a prophet for our own day, as you go home today, wonder what it is that you are doing – and can do – to tend God's garden.

How are you that beacon of hope, a moral defibrillator?

How can we together send shock waves of mercy and love and justice for all in our families, in our church, in New Haven?

How can we drop small pebbles in the pool of unjust systems that will send out their ripples to water those who have none?

Change will not be easy or comfortable or fast. It will cause division.

But we are not the first to stand for God and we will not be the last. And we are not alone.

This is what it means to be a disciple.

This is what it means to work for the KOG on earth.

Jesus's peace – the peace of God which passes all understanding –

may mean disruption

but the harvest will be sweet justice

fertile righteousness

and joy experiences and lived by all.

May it be so! Amen

The Rev Julie Kelsey

St Thomas's Church

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