

## **Song of the Vineyard**

**Isaiah 5:1-7**

**Psalm 80:7-15**

How many of you are familiar with this little idiom: “ He who plants a seed beneath the sod, and waits to see believes in God?” Most likely anyone who has ever planted a garden, whether flower or vegetable, can identify with these words. There is a lot of hope and trust that goes into planning, planting, watering, weeding, and then, hopefully, harvesting the fruits of our labors. Yet for all the hope and trust we invest, there is no iron-clad guarantee that there will be a harvest. A late spring or early fall frost, hurricanes and tornadoes, drought or excessive rain, insects and animals, all can thwart even the most dedicated gardener’s plans.

The same is true with people. Children’s book author, Noora Ahmed Alsuwaidi, said this about raising children:

“Just like a seed that needs intensive care to grow into a magnificent tree, a child needs the same amount of love, effort, care, and kindness to grow into a healthy, aware, responsible adult.

A sapling doesn't grow with neglect, thirst, or underfeeding, and neither do children. Fulfilling their various needs will help them grow into fine grown-ups who repay kindness with kindness and return love with love.”

Yet we are sadly aware that even when children receive all these things there are times that the “harvest” is not a good one. Despite their parent’s best intentions

and efforts, children go astray following a road that leads to their own destruction. Such was the situation to which Isaiah delivered his message of the vineyard.

In the time of Isaiah, the people of Israel were primarily agrarian in their trades – sheep farmers, cattle farmers, growers of vegetables and vineyards. This is why so many of the stories in the Bible have these agrarian themes, they speak in a language the people would understand.

So, Isaiah begins his story by retelling how the owner of a vineyard carefully and methodically cleared the land and planted the best vines. He even put up a watchtower in the vineyard to be sure no one came along to do harm to what he had planted. For all his hard work he expected to reap a generous harvest.

Unfortunately, his vineyard only produced wild grapes. This would be a crushing disappointment because wild grapes are small, sour, and worthless for making wine. Their best use is to feed the scavenger birds eating off the trash heap. The wild grapes, being aggressive vines, had even likely taken over the good vines and smothered them.

This major disappointment caused the vineyard owner to decide to give up on the vineyard. He would remove all the protections he had put in place and let the wild animals in to trample and devour whatever they could find. He wouldn't even bother to see that it was watered. He was writing it off as a total loss.

Then comes the kicker – Isaiah tells his listeners that the ill-fated vineyard was them - the entire house of Israel, was judged as a lost cause. Why you might ask? After all the work God had done to secure Israel a homeland, and had appointed the kings the people had asked for, in return was the expectation that the people would obey his commands that justice and mercy flow from his people. Instead

God observed bloodshed. Instead of righteousness being practiced by his people, God heard the cries of the oppressed. This was *not* the harvest that was expected.

In a way, Isaiah is like a lawyer in a courtroom laying out before the jury the facts in a case for them to decide. Who do you think is at fault in this case – was it the gardener or the vineyard that is responsible for the final outcome? After all, we know that the gardener did all the right things to prepare the garden; it was the vineyard that produced the wild grapes. Being the wild grapes in this story, Israel was found guilty.

The consequences of their actions called for the destruction of the nation. It can be difficult to live with the consequences of actions not of our own making. When a child who had been reared in a loving home makes unwise choices, shattering the hopes and dreams of their parents; or when the prudent investments made over years of planning fall prey to hard economic times and retirement must be pushed off; or when longtime loyalty to your employer ends with an untimely layoff as the business is shuttered. These times call for a close look at ourselves – our identity, our goals, even our relationships. When you've done all the right things, but still end up hurt by the poor decisions of others, how do you cope? As gardeners, we simply plow everything under and plan for the next season.

God called for the destruction of the nation - pull down the protective hedges and give it over to its enemies. Yet God remains a just God. The people of Israel carried their guilt on their own heads. Having been charged, judged, and convicted, the people of Israel had a decision to make. They could continue in their ways, which had led them away from God, or they could choose to move toward God, living a righteous life in relationship with Him. They would do well to pay close attention to their words and actions, no longer creating and sustaining systems of injustice that separated them from God.

The Biblical story tells us that the Israelite nation continued to struggle with injustice. Through several hundred years the prophets brought warnings and condemnations to the people. For several hundred years the Biblical canon is silent, until there is a response to the call from Psalm 80:

**Psalm 80:14-15 (NIV2011)**

<sup>14</sup> Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, <sup>15</sup> the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself.

God did raise up a son for himself, the vine we know as Jesus Christ. Hear his own words:

**John 15:1-8 (NIV2011)**

<sup>1</sup> “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

<sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

<sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

<sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

<sup>5</sup> “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

<sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

Jesus tells us that unless we are in relationship with him, we are no better than wild grapes, good only for the trash heap. Paraphrasing Matthew Henry’s commentary on Psalm 80:

If we do not bear good fruit, we are worthless. We have been planted in a well-cultivated garden, with every means available to be fruitful in works of righteousness. If empty words and practices exceed true piety, all is wasted.

God decided once to plow under an unproductive garden. How does he see the church today? Does He see good fruit –love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Or have the seeds of unrighteousness produced weeds that are choking out the good vines?

With the psalmist, let us ask God to once again to look down from heaven and see. To protect and tend, guide and strengthen the vine he planted, His church, to do acts of righteousness in the world today until we bear rich fruit.

Join me in prayer:

Lord God,

you ask of us today:

“My people, answer me:

What more could I have done for you?”

Teach and help us to respond with our whole being  
to your daily forgiveness and patience,  
to the riches of life brought us by Jesus,  
to the prompting of the Holy Spirit,  
that we may be a people that bears lasting fruits.  
May we bring to all a justice animated by love,

may we learn to share as you do with us.

Show us your mercy through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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