

Isaiah 5:1-7

An Angry God

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Our scripture reading today probably doesn't get preached on a whole lot. It starts off so nice - a love song - but boy does it take a turn as it describes an angry God ready to slash and burn everything. We start out with Isaiah at a party with wealthy, powerful people. He offers to sing them a love song. Brennan Breed writes: "Ancient professional singers wrote lyrics that were not only steamy in their time, but are so in ours too. Wealthy people loved these racy songs at parties—so when Isaiah got up to address the elite crowd at a feast in Jerusalem, some onlookers might have been amused that the old religious guy picked up the mic and then immediately made it clear he was going to sing a popular, racy love song (5:1)."¹

With all attention on him, Isaiah begins a song about his love who is a vineyard owner. This owner went out and found the perfect soil in the best spot for his vineyard. He cleared it of stones, planted the best seeds and kept watch. He did everything right and more. He nurtured and cared for his vines with the greatest of detail and attention. He provided everything for them; gave them all they would need to succeed and yield the most beautiful, delicious grapes. What a great song so far.

Then, the story takes a surprising turn. The grapes are not only bad, they stink. They are terrible. How could this have happened? That's when Isaiah pulls the rug out from under everyone. He's not talking about some vineyard owner after all. He's talking about God. God is the owner. And the terrible tasting grapes? That's them, the nation of Israel.

"Before Israel can stutter their objections and excuses, God identifies their bad grapes, their stinking, rancid, rotten lives. (the prophet says God) "looked for justice, but saw bloodshed, for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." (This statement in the Hebrew is even more powerful because the words sound a lot alike but mean completely different things): "justice" is the word mishpat and "bloodshed" is the word mispah, while "righteousness" is tsedeqah and "cries of distress" is tseaqah. (in other words God is saying) What I looked for and what I found may sound alike, but they are the exact opposite.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20-3/commentary-on-isaiah-51-7-12>

(God essentially says): You have taken my love and totally distorted it in your lives. I wanted you to bear the fruit of justice and righteousness on earth, to exhibit and enact my justice and righteousness. That's why I did all that for you. You have completely distorted my intentions, choosing to simply enjoy the privileges I gave you, rather than doing justice and living righteousness. And that stinks."²

Isaiah doesn't name the specific sins of the people here, but if we read both back and ahead, we'd see Isaiah is often speaking about things like how: the people do not defend the cause of the widow and orphan (1:23), they coveted and stored up wealth for themselves (1:29), they oppressed the poor (3:14-15), they acquitted the guilty and deprived the innocent of their rights (5:23).

Then Isaiah brings the song home by telling the people God is going to take away the protections for the "vineyard" and let it be destroyed; allow it to be trampled and to become a wasteland. God will no longer nurture it or allow rain to fall there. God will turn from the nation altogether.

Oof. I can't imagine Isaiah's audience enjoyed that turn of events. Big bummer for the party. A good old public shaming. And a reminder of God's capacity for anger and judgement. I doubt anyone clapped for Isaiah's song.

And honestly, I don't think Isaiah would get any more applause today. We certainly aren't begging to hear about our failings and lack of justice, and perhaps even more, we don't like to hear about God's anger or judgement. In more theologically progressive churches, like ours, we lean heavily on talk of God's unconditional love; God's always available forgiveness and mercy; and God's deep compassion for God's people. We preach this because we believe it and we preach it in contrast to others who claim God's love is only for some people or some nations. We preach it in contrast to those who say forgiveness is only available conditionally for certain people and those who would say some people and some sins are not worthy of compassion at all. We preach it in contrast to the many preachers who lean heavily into a God of anger and judgement with what often seems like the desire to create fear and submission in people. So, yes, I stand firmly behind the message of God's amazing love covering everyone and everything. I think we are definitely leaning to the correct side of things. But we ignore passages of scripture which speak about God's anger and judgement at our peril because if we ignore them and focus only on a God of love and forgiveness in our preaching, we risk making God into some kind of benign, buddy God.

There is a study about this exact phenomenon that talks about this kind of "buddy God" faith many people have these days. The study says that people may call it

² <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-08-12/isaiah-51-7-2/>

Christianity, but it is really something else. They suggest the catchy name: “moralistic therapeutic deism.” They suggest that this, MTD for short, has “almost without anyone noticing, converted believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.” In other words, it is a faith based on a God who is “nice.”

The study suggests this faith would include statements in its creeds like:
“God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.”
“The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.”
“God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.”
“Good people go to heaven when they die.”³

What these statements have in common are that they are each nice ideas which are very easy to believe in and require very little from the believer. And, they are nice, and may even contain aspects of truth, but they are not, alone, representative of Christianity. The Christianity we encounter in the Bible certainly has plenty to say about love and forgiveness and compassion, but it also speaks a lot about justice and righteousness and living a life that cares for all of creation. The Bible actually has a lot of passages, like the one we read today, which speak about God’s condemnation, anger and judgement. And, if we are only used to a God who is “nice,” then we certainly don’t know what to do with that. Alternatively, if we grew up in a tradition where God’s anger and judgement was used to cause fear or demand submission, then we may want to avoid those passages altogether.

So, let’s take a look at what Isaiah is telling us about God in this song and what we can learn about God’s anger and judgement.

First, we hear about a God who has given us everything. Isaiah doesn’t just paint a picture of an angry God. He starts with a God who has given us every good thing, every opportunity, every resource, to make a good world. He tells us about a God who deeply loves and invests in this world. And certainly, when we look around the world, we can see there is much good in the world and we have even helped to make some of it.

Then, Isaiah tells us about a God who doesn’t rush to condemnation and anger, but first asks questions. God wonders what else God could have done. Was there something God could have done to change the results? This God wants to understand what went wrong. Why don’t we produce the sweet grapes of justice and righteousness God set us up to produce?

³ Dean, Kenda Creasy. “Faith, Nice and Easy: The Almost-Christian Formation of Teens.” *The Christian Century*, 3 Aug. 2010, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2010-08/faith-nice-and-easy>.

Only then do we get to God's anger and judgement. God is going to destroy the vineyard. Stop nurturing it. Allow the whole thing to be trampled and decimated. But, it is worth pointing out God doesn't say the destruction is forever. It doesn't say God will never again love and nurture God's people. It doesn't say God has given up hope.

So, God's anger and judgement is not permanent, but the anger and judgement exists. We have a God who can be angry. We have a God who can look at the world and pass judgement on how truly out of sorts it is. We have a God who can call us to account; who can expect better; who loves us enough to care when things have gone wrong; who has intentionally shown us examples of transformation and resurrection, so we will know it is possible to turn things around. We have a God who can allow us to suffer the consequences of our own actions. And whoo boy, are there consequences. By which, I don't mean that God is sending certain plagues or storms or wars. Our actions breed their own consequences well enough.

But, passages like this remind us of a God who is capable of anger and judgment. We could be paralyzed by this and afraid to do anything at all. Or we could take the time to ask serious questions about the kinds of grapes our vines are producing and wonder if we might be worthy recipients of that anger and judgement. If we are, what might we do about it?

We might imagine starting off with looking at all of Christianity in its many diverse expressions today. It is worthwhile to criticize expressions of Christianity, like Christian nationalism, which believes God favors the United States over other countries (God does not), or churches and denominations who blame the poor for their poverty and turn away, or churches or denominations who call for violence. It is worth pointing fingers at churches or denominations who store up phenomenal riches for themselves and hoard resources; or examine churches or denominations who publicly align themselves with politicians who acquit the guilty and persecute the innocent. It would be right for those of us who call ourselves Christians to look upon those expressions of Christianity and say there is something wrong there. We can be prophets ourselves by saying those behaviors don't match our understanding of who God has called us to be.

But, scripture has plenty to say about the perils of pointing our fingers only one way. We must look at the grapes we are growing ourselves. Are the grapes we are growing sweet or do they smell rancid? Are we individually and as a church truly doing all we can to care for the poor, to speak up for the oppressed, to show compassion to the marginalized, to speak against injustice, to offer forgiveness to our enemies, to share our resources and not hoard them? Certainly not. I mean, I know we are doing a number of those things together, but as much as we can? No. Which means we ought to be careful to balance the time we might spend prophesying about others with the time we are working to produce our own good fruit.

A piece of good news in the face of God's anger and judgment is that God has not given up on us. One of the best proofs I know of this is the scripture itself - a story of a prophet sent by God. God keeps sending prophets to keep reminding us what the world is meant to look like. Then, consider how the folks who put together the Bible didn't just pick the story of one prophet from one time, but chose a wide range of prophets from different times and places; prophets of different ages and education and profession; prophets who spoke to different kinds of people. And the prophets didn't stop when the back cover of the Bible went on. There have been and continue to be prophets who live among us and tell each generation of the ways we are missing the mark. Again and again, people say they want to follow God, but then give over power to a king or a dictator or celebrity or wealth or whatever, and the patterns of injustice and oppression and greed and hunger for more power repeat. So, God keeps sending prophets, again and again, even though most of them are ignored, reviled or killed.

When we look at the world around us and consider what God's response to it might be, that is the Holy Spirit within us poking and prodding us to hear the words of the prophets and do something. When we have a knowing inside that things are not as they should be; that there is too much bloodshed and too many cries of distress, we know we are called to act.

Our greatest hope and desire should be to produce the finest quality fruit we can. Not because we fear God's anger and judgement, though it is fearsome, but because we have seen all the nurture and tending God has put into us. Because we have experienced God's love and compassion and forgiveness ourselves. Because we want to live in a world of justice and righteousness, not bloodshed and distress. May it be so. Amen.