



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT/WORLD AIDS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, December 2, 2012 (World AIDS Day is December 1, 2012)

Raquel St. Clair Lettsome, Lectionary Team Commentator

Lection – Isaiah 5:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. (v. 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. (v. 3) And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. (v. 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? (v. 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. (v. 6) I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. (v. 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!

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Advent, from the Latin word *adventus* (“coming”), is the liturgical season characterized by expectant waiting and preparation. During this season, we celebrate Christ’s coming into the

world while expectantly waiting and preparing for his promised return. We are reminded that God is faithful, a fulfiller of promises made. We rejoice that God is Emmanuel, God with us, and that God's presence among us brings light, joy, and hope even in our darkest situations. Perhaps that is why the consistent message given to humans during this season is "fear not" or "do not be afraid" (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:12, 30). This is the message of the liturgical season and this is the message to the Church as we observe World AIDS Day.

World AIDS Day, established on December 1, 1988 by the World Health Organization, is an opportunity for the church to combat the fear, prejudice, and discrimination that affect those living with HIV/AIDS. This is particularly significant for African American churches since the CDC reports that African Americans comprise 44% of all new HIV infections. By raising awareness of the global fight against HIV/AIDS, supporting those living with the virus, and commemorating those who have died, we show Christ's redeeming love and demonstrate that God is with ALL of us, thereby giving hope to those infected with a disease that is often viewed as hopeless and outside the presence of God.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 5:1-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Advent, the season preceding Christmas, is my favorite liturgical season. I have always been a person who revels in the excitement of expectation. As a child, December 23rd was my favorite day of the year. It is one day before December 24th, Christmas Eve, the night I would go to bed early and whatever time I woke up (usually 3:00 or 4:00 am) I could open my presents. I was as happy on December 23rd as I was on the 24th or the 25th—the presents were as good as mine. There was no need to worry or fear. Expectation was guaranteed to yield fulfillment. Not because I trusted Santa Claus, as I did not believe in him. I trusted my father. I knew he bought the gifts. If I did not get all I asked for, there would always be more than I started with, and that would be enough because I also loved the one who brought the gifts.

As I have matured as a Christian and as an adult, I find that it is no longer enough to approach this season solely expecting God. God is a given—God will show up. The question I now ask myself is: Will I show up in the ways, in the places, and for people as God expects?

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

It is a time of economic and political stability. Judah is faring well during the reign of King Uzziah. They are doing so well that they have forgotten the One who is responsible for the peace, protection, and prosperity that they enjoy.¹ They simply expect it to continue. However, Isaiah's prophetic utterance pronounces impending disaster. The reason is simple: they have not lived up to God's expectations.

Verse 1: The prophetic utterance comes in the form of a "love song" to his "beloved" about "his vineyard." The vineyard is ideally positioned on a *keren* (lit. translated "horn"), a high place enabling it to receive sunlight from all angles, and is lush with nutrient soil.

Verse 2: The beloved labored meticulously over this vineyard. The work was nothing less than backbreaking: digging, clearing stones, building a watchtower. This was preparation for the planting of *sorek* or “choice vines” which would produce high quality grapes with almost imperceptible seeds.² He labored with expectation, hewing out stone for a wine vat. He was literally “waiting for” it to yield grapes. But instead, it brought forth *ba’ osh*, a foul stench of decay—rotten, stinking, sour grapes.

Verses 3-4: The solo becomes a duet. It is no longer the voice of the prophet. The beloved now speaks for himself. He pleads his case as if he is in a court of law. He calls the people of Judah, and specifically the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the capitol city, to judge this case between him and his vineyard. Who is at fault—the vinedresser or the vineyard? The vinedresser argues that he has done everything necessary to fulfill his expectations: receive a harvest of grapes. Yet despite it all, he got wild ones.

Verses 5-6: The vinedresser does not wait for a verdict. He declares his course of action. He will destroy the protective barrier (remove the hedge and break down the wall) and he will withhold the care he has given (no pruning, hoeing, or rain). The result is that the vineyard will be devoured, trampled, and laid waste.

Verse 7: Isaiah once again picks up the song and completes the metaphor. The Lord of hosts is the owner of the vineyard. The house of Israel is the vineyard. The people are the plantings, the vines that yielded wild grapes. Just as the beloved planted a vineyard, so the Lord of hosts planted the house of Israel in expectation of a harvest. However, the crop that the Lord expected was justice (*mishpat*), but instead he saw bloodshed (*mispah*). The Lord expected righteousness (*tsedaqah*) and only heard cries of anarchy and the denial of justice (*tseah*).³

During this season of Advent, we often have expectations of God. We expect God to be faithful, dependable, and available. We expect God to provide. But in the midst of wanting and waiting, we must also witness to what God has already done and given. Like the house of Israel, the house of God must acknowledge that God protected, planted, provided for, and prospered us. However, God’s graciousness and blessings were given for a purpose. God did it with the expectation that a harvest of justice and righteousness would come from us.

As we observe World AIDS Day, the church must fulfill the expectation of God. We must promote justice for people suffering from HIV/AIDS beginning with our treatment of them in the house of God. We must live righteously with one another by advocating for each other, welcoming one another, and ministering to each other regardless of one’s HIV status or how one contracted the disease.

God is looking for justice and righteousness, not from the world but from God’s own planting. We are a part of God’s vine (John 15: 1-5) and our celebration of Advent should bear fruit on God’s behalf. According to Isaiah 5:1-7, God is serious about this. The Lord will not abide “wild grapes.”

Celebration

The celebration for this text is found in verse 2. The Lord of hosts has already given and done what is necessary for the vineyard to bring forth the expected harvest. The vineyard has been:

- **Positioned**—God has located it in a place with the resources to serve its purpose. It need not fear lack. What it requires it will have because it is located on a “fertile hill.” The resources we need are inside the building, among the people we overlook and ignore, as we search for provision outside the door.
- **Prepared**—God has painstakingly readied the vineyard for a harvest. God has cleared out what hindered and has gotten the soil ready for growth.
- **Protected**—We do not have to live in fear of people with HIV/AIDS. We can arm ourselves with knowledge rather than cower in our corners afraid of myths. We can support, love, encourage, care for, and advocate for those infected. The vineyard that God builds has a watchtower!

All of the Lord’s work is undergird with expectation and hope, the hope of a fruitful harvest. God expects his work to prosper, produce, and increase. We can experience abundant life, all of us. This abundance is not determined by a doctor’s diagnosis or blood test. The abundance comes as justice is rendered to all and righteousness reigns among us.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The voice of the prophet as he sings this love-song (v. 1); the voice of the beloved questioning the people (v. 3); the sound of people crying out because of injustice (v. 7);

Sights: The vineyard (v.1); the lushness of the fertile hill (v. 1); the intense physical labor of the beloved digging, clearing stones, planting, building, and hewing stone (v. 2); the expectant look on the beloved surveying the work that was done (v. 2); grapes that are unfit for the wine vat (v. 2); a dry, barren vineyard overgrown with thorny weeds and scattered rocks from broken walls (vv. 5-6); blood of people denied justice (v. 7);

Smells: Clean air and turned-over earth (v. 2); sweat of the beloved tending the vineyard (v. 2); grapes decaying on the vines (vv. 4-6); dry earth thirsty for rain (v.6); blood congealing (v. 7); and

Tastes: Sourness of wild grapes (v. 2), and the sourness of disappointment.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

Songs

“If We Are the Body” by Casting Crowns

For a list of hymns for Advent (or any topic) with free downloadable recordings, go to:
www.LNWhymns.com.

Quotations

The church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

—Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 1963

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

—Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love, 1963

If we walk in righteousness He will carry us through.

—A.B. Simpson, Founder, Christian Missionary Alliance

God has work to do in this world; and to desert it because of its difficulties and entanglements is to cast off His authority. It is not enough that we be just, that we be righteous, and walk with God in holiness; but we must also serve our generation, as David did before he fell asleep. God has a work to do; and not to help Him is to oppose Him.

—John Owen, Puritan theologian, 1616–1683

Notes

1. Smith, Gary V. New American Commentary: Isaiah 1–39. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007, p. 120.

2. Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and D. Brown. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments (Is 5:2). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997.

3. Ibid.