

“God’s Insistence and Our Resistance”

August 14, 2022

Scripture: Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56

So, these are two pretty negative readings this morning. That’s an understatement! In Isaiah we have God comparing Israel to a vineyard that produces bad grapes and needs to be uprooted and destroyed. In Luke Jesus tells folks he’s there to cause division not just in society but in the very fabric of families. And then...he calls them all hypocrites! So, thanks for coming, everyone! Enjoy your day! Hypocrites!

We’re obviously not dealing here with the Dale Carnegie version of the gospel. But I do think what’s being said is more nuanced than it seems. For instance, in the passage from Isaiah we have a parable told about the high hopes with which God entered this relationship with Israel. God’s desire for all creation is intended to be embodied in the life of Israel. A theme that runs throughout Isaiah is the understanding that Israel is meant to be a beacon for the world. Their relationship with God was never intended for their benefit alone. It was to draw the world to God by becoming so winsome, so irresistible, that the rulers of the world would see their justice and righteousness and be moved by them. That’s God’s hope.

But that hope is thwarted by the reality of human frailty, our incapacity to seek the good of our neighbor over our own. Most human societies seem to run aground on that reality. But in the world of Isaiah not many societies were designed to realize a vision of justice and compassion. Most were structured on rigid hierarchies where people at the bottom were enslaved to those at the top. So, the model of society God is hoping to build isn’t very common in that world.

And it’s becoming less common today. In those places where laws exist to establish that model, more and more people in leadership are bent on dismantling it. If you’ve heard the rhetoric of people like Vladimir Putin of Russia, Victor Orban of Hungary, Recep Erdogan of Turkey, as well as any number of rightwing candidates in other democracies including our own, you know the appeal of authoritarianism is growing. In the world of Isaiah the prophet looks at what’s happening to his society and he’s inspired to deliver a message of doom to his people. Because what they’re becoming cannot be sustained and will not be tolerated by the God who is merciful and just, compassionate and abounding in steadfast love.

God will leave them to their own devices, will allow them to experience the consequences of their poor choices and let the chips fall where they may. As I’ve mentioned before, one of the over-arching conundrums Jewish scripture wrestles with is the experience of exile. In their struggle to explain it, Israel’s prophets look to their leadership as the cause for their humiliation and not to God. So, it’s not that God abandoned Israel, but Israel abandoned God and the requirements of Torah. In his commentary on Isaiah, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts emphasis on the phrasing used to describe God. God “expects” certain results from the vineyard that is Israel. Those expectations are “justice” and “righteousness.” Justice is understood as equal treatment and restorative practices. But instead of justice God finds

“bloodshed,” described by Brueggemann as “the outpouring of lifeblood through exploitative social practice...the kinds of economic transactions that abuse, injure and slowly bleed the people to death.” Righteousness is understood as “equitable, generative social relations,” but instead God hears an outcry, described again by Brueggemann as “the feeble social protests of those who are victimized by rapacious social policy.”

The society God intended to plant has been subverted. Its leaders have allowed it to fall into hardship and chaos. For the prophets speaking on behalf of God the measure of Israel’s well-being is the condition of the poorest and most vulnerable. Where the widow and orphan and alien are cared for with compassion, being given access to the means for living sustainably and to the courts to have complaints addressed, the life of Israel is healthy and productive. But when that treatment is undermined, when the poor and vulnerable are neglected or mistreated, society will fall apart. That condition is inherently unsustainable.

When Jesus tells his listeners he has come to bring division and not peace, what he means is he has come to reveal the injustice and unrighteousness of his society. His teaching and ministry doesn’t cause division; it exposes it. And that exposure is too much for the leaders of his day to tolerate. They lash out and do all they can to silence anyone who dares to speak truth to their power. Jesus is speaking to the crowds in Judea, he’s not addressing the religious leaders or the Roman establishment. But those are the ones he exposes. The religious leaders of Judea are cooperating with the Roman occupiers to maintain their hold on power and to save their own necks. There are certainly those who see that as the only sensible option; the need for survival can lead you to make some deep compromises. But if that survival is at the expense of your core principles, then you’re already defeated.

Jesus tells his listeners to read the signs around them. Things are falling apart. In our own society we’re discovering what happens when hateful speech is allowed to flourish, when hostilities toward immigrants and refugees, people of color, people who are gay, lesbian or transgender, is given space in the marketplace of ideas as if they were no different than other opinions. We’ve seen the violence that can be inspired and unleashed in our own community and just this weekend at Chautauqua when extremism is normalized. Jesus brings a message of inclusion and compassion, he insists that his society is better than they’ve become. Yet they resist it. He doesn’t cause division.

When we turn our backs on our core principles, when we refuse to speak up against hatred and hold our leaders to standards of justice and compassion because we want to keep the peace, we become the vineyard producing wild grapes that God detests. And if we’re paying attention we can see things are falling apart. That’s the bad news these readings reveal. But to fully understand them, we need to look at them more broadly. The story in Isaiah doesn’t stand in isolation. It’s part of a much longer story of God’s continuing insistence that Israel live up to its ideals. In spite of exile and occupation and resistance, God will not give up on Israel. And I’m convinced God will not give up on us.

In Jesus’ life, death and resurrection we’re given God’s answer to our resistance. God rejects our rejection and through Christ keeps compelling us to be more. Even though we find it hard to believe justice is possible, God insists we have the capacity to be just. Even though we

see little evidence of righteous compassion in our society, God insists we hold that compassion within us and can act on it if we choose. We can choose to align ourselves with God's desire for the world. We can become the productive vineyard God hopes to grow. When we let ourselves be moved by those around us in need, when we commit ourselves to the well-being of the poorest and most vulnerable even at the expense of our own security, then divisions will be healed and peace will start to flourish.

Always, God offers us a choice: do we continue to resist and watch helplessly as our world spirals into chaos or do we cooperate with God's desire for us and embrace the true nature God insists we carry? The good news is God won't give up on us, even if things seem hopeless. God isn't finished with us. We can turn around and become the people God longs us to be. In the face of God's insistence we can replace the "No!" of our resistance with a resounding "Yes!"

Amen