

When the God of Love Gets Angry

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Isaiah 5:1-7 — Let me sing for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 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. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 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? 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. 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. 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!

Sometimes, when we read the Bible, the God we read about surprises us. And sometimes, it's an unpleasant surprise. For example, when we read one of the Hebrew prophets, like Isaiah, God occasionally comes across as angry, even enraged, vengeful, oppressive. There are dozens of examples, and our reading this morning is one of them: "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. I will make it a waste."

The text explicitly says that the tribes of ancient Israel are this vineyard: it's talking about people — living, breathing people. And *God's* people, nonetheless, the descendants of Abraham, whom God promised to bless and to make a blessing to the world. So, God will devour God's chosen people — or at least will let them be devoured...but is that much better? God will make God's people a waste, all because they yielded wild grapes? Countless times, I'm sure, someone has opened their bible to this chapter and just started reading, hoping to receive a word of comfort from God, and instead found themselves confused and concerned, wondering, "Are wild grapes really all that bad?"

This morning, I want to share why this passage, and similar ones, can be confusing and concerning for so many people of faith, and then I want to share two ways that, despite the confusion and concern, clarity and comfort can break through in such passages. I believe that God's truth and God's love are here for us, in these words; they may just take a little longer to find.

Now if you're like me, there's at least a part of you that would prefer to have a consistently positive God, who is never anything but caring, gentle, and kind. And, if you're like me, there's a part of you that would prefer to have a perfectly serene God, who is unmoved by all of the

craziness in our world, who is totally beyond our often-fickle emotions. But as much as we might prefer that, that's not the God we get in this book. The bible is filled with stories that describe divine emotions and divine pain. In these stories, God is happy and sad, playful and upset, and even sometimes hurt. And what's more, God feels all of these things because of *us*. As people of faith, we profess that the God of the universe pays attention to us, that God deeply cares about what's going on here, in our lives. We believe that when we rejoice, say, when new life comes into the world, the spirit of God rejoices with us. And we believe that when we grieve, say, when a loved one dies, the spirit of God grieves with us. God is truly and fully present in the joys and sorrows alike. God cares. And sometimes, it seems, God cares enough to get angry.

But that isn't necessarily easy to swallow. In Isaiah 5, we see divine anger and disappointment in strong, harsh doses. And, again, if you're like me, the idea of an angry God makes you a little nervous.

Now, there are some people who derive joy from the thought of a God filled with anger, a God who is eager to punish those who they dislike or who they think are wrong. But this is a foolish joy, for it neglects to consider just how closely we can resemble those we dislike and how ignorant we can be of our own shortcomings. The wise person treats the idea of an angry God with the utmost humility, fear, and trembling, for the wise person knows that if God is angry, God could very well direct divine anger towards them.

But back to Isaiah 5. Here, Isaiah hopes to give his readers just a sliver of an understanding of how God feels about the ways God's people are living. And to do this, Isaiah paints an allegorical picture of a vineyard, whose builder and caretaker, God, feels furious and destructive. And that image of divine fury and destruction is confusing and concerning to many people of faith.

But there is much more to this passage than that image. I want to share with you two truths that I see coming through in these verses. The first truth: God is deeply offended by injustice, especially among God's people. All of the anger and disappointment that we see in these verses, it's because God desired to witness equality and harmony among God's people, but instead poverty, division, and violence were rampant. If we're going to talk about the wrath of God, as depicted in the bible or maybe even in the world today, that wrath is aimed at these things — poverty, division, violence, and the forces that perpetuate and excuse them. When we witness these things today, we're likely to feel pity for a moment, and then to go about our normal lives; but when God witnesses injustice, God doesn't merely feel pity; God gets angry. I can't help but wonder if we would do well to try and tap into God's anger at injustices. Perhaps that would help us to live the just lives to which we are called.

Second, and lastly, this passage reminds me of the truth that love isn't always pretty. Sometimes, love gets angry, jealous, desirous, irrepressible — including the love of God. Isaiah 5 begins, "Let me sing for my beloved, my love-song concerning his vineyard." Is this, all of this here, a love-song? For a love that feels the deepest of passions and the highest of hopes, yes; for a love

that cares enough to cry out when a relationship has gone awry, yes; for a love that is committed to being the best that it can be, yes. It's a complex love-song, sometimes harmonious, sometimes discordant, but always emerging out of a passionate covenant between God and God's people.

When I was a teenager, my mom and I fought a fair amount — mostly over me wanting to watch more TV and her wanting me to watch less. I vividly remember one of our shorter arguments. I wanted to be allowed to watch two hours of TV a day, or something like that, and she was sticking to her longstanding standard of less time. I raised my voice in protest, about to make a point in our debate that I was sure could not be refuted: “Mom, did you know that the average teenager watches...” Three hours a day? Four hours a day? I don't remember what I was going to say, but it doesn't matter, because I didn't get to — my mom interrupted me, which she rarely does: “Willy, I am not trying to raise the average teenager.” And I knew, right then, that I had lost the debate. In that moment, I understood that my mom's rule was rooted in her high expectations for me, and her high expectations were rooted in her love for me.

Friends, God is not trying to raise an average people. God has high expectations for us, and while God is always gracious, always gracious, when we fall short of those expectations, we must remind ourselves regularly of the high calling that we have received. God is love, but in a world full of injustice, love isn't always pretty. Whether God is planting us, tending us, or pruning us, whether we feel like we're being built up or being knocked down, our calling in life is to love and to do justice, knowing that our God of passion guides us along the way. Amen.