

A New Song for an Old Story

Isaiah 5.1-7; Psalm 80.7-15; Philippians 3.4b-14; Matthew 21.33-46

There is something about the autumn season that draws out my affection for the music of singer-songwriters. Autumn might be the most literary of the four seasons. The passage of time around us sparks reflection about where life is and where it's going. We gather around campfires in autumn, we tell stories, and it's an especially good campfire if you have an adept acoustic guitarist around that circle.

Even though I haven't gathered around a campfire yet, I'm turning to some old songs and stories in the catalogues of Van Morrison and Simon & Garfunkel this autumn. I also have some new songs in the mix from good new artists like Ben Kyle, Josh Garrels, and the Milk Carton Kids. Sometimes the best way to hear and enter a story is through a song. /

When we hear this reading from Isaiah, it's clear that we're meant to enter a story that God is telling. It's also clear that God has chosen to tell this story through a song. It's an old story and the song has a familiar tune, so to speak. God is the composer. God is the singer-songwriter drawing us into his tragic story.

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; and he look for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. These grapes are bitter to the taste, they make your mouth wince in pain.

The song concludes in verse 4 with an open-ended lament: *What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I look for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?*

This is a song of love refused, love rejected. We know the song isn't about physical grapes, but the image of grapes, wine, and a vineyard are not chosen by accident. The passage ends with the prophet explaining God's story-song about Israel: *The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting.* /

This is a tragic story, a heartbreaking song. It is the first stanza of a love song between God and his people—a very old love song with an uncertain future. The problem is clear. Israel who once was weak and delivered from oppression in Egypt has

now become an oppressor of the weak herself. [The Lord] *looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!!!*

Another voice, another storyteller takes up God's love song in the second stanza, five centuries later. The Son of God is born within Israel to call her back to her God; to be who she was called to be, a vineyard that would yield the fruit of the kingdom—justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Jesus clearly takes up the Song of the Vineyard from Isaiah when he addresses the Pharisees here in Matthew 21. Jesus doesn't speak in the form of verse; instead, he tells a story, a parable. God's love song has taken the form of a story. But the story that Jesus tells about the vineyard and its owners has a new episode that Isaiah could not have known. /

Just like a song with a melodic theme that sustains the whole piece, so a recurring theme appears in Jesus' story that began in Isaiah. The people of God, once delivered from weakness and oppression, established their world on injustice and violence. In this second stanza, so to speak, there's a twist that awaits in Jesus' story. That's often how parables work.

When Jesus speaks about vineyards, they know the reference points in Isaiah and other places in the Old Testament. They know the labor intensive process of planting a vineyard. 'Planted a vineyard. Yes. Dug a winepress. Yes. Built a tower. Yes. Leased it to tenants. Yes. Yes. Yes. We know this story. We know where this is going.' Only they don't.

The disruptive, surprising turn in this story is the owner sending his own son. With every right to exact justice on the criminal acts committed against the first two stewards, the owner's justice works very differently at a much different pace. His justice is **not** swift in the story. He holds the power, but he wields power differently. He holds back his anger, revealing his power through his son, the son who will suffer and die. /

Ask any vocalist the most difficult volume to sing and they will tell you it is pianissimo—the softest volume. It is easy to sing fortissimo, to belt out the loudest volume. But it takes greater power and self-control to sing softly. It is a hidden form of power.

The vineyard of Israel yielded the bitter fruit of violence and injustice, never more violent than when Israel's greatest son suffered and died on the cross. Remember Jesus' last request on the cross? He said, 'I am thirsty.' And what was our response?

Not just Israel's, but all nations, were represented by that Roman soldier at the cross. We lifted a sponge of bitter vinegar, sour wine, to the Lord's lips. *Why does my vineyard yield wild grapes?*

And there, on the cross, a place of cursing and shame, we saw the power of God at work. Jesus trusted the way the Father's power and justice works: *'If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to myself.'*

So even that shameful, horrific moment at the cross is not where the old Song of the Vineyard ends. Even in Isaiah's book, we have hints that creation is not meant to sing the old songs of love scorned and refused. God has an everlasting affection for new songs. The first half of Isaiah's book is filled with warnings and judgments for Israel's infidelity. The second half of the book, the word 'new' appears all over the place. God gives Israel a **new** song. God promises **new** wine and he will not destroy his vineyard. God promises to make a **new** heavens and a **new** earth.

All of the 'new' that God gives comes through his time, his justice, his power. A power that we have difficulty seeing. We hear the echo of additional words that the Lord speaks through Isaiah, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

The way God's hidden power works always surprises us, which brings us to the third stanza in this song today. The appearance of the Son isn't the only twist in this story-song. There's another surprise that awaits us.

Even after the cross and empty tomb, God isn't done with Israel. So he takes his love song to one of the wildest vines in the vineyard, so to speak—Saul of Tarsus. Here is the most severe persecutor of the early church. Saul's hatred of Jesus was bitter and aggressive. He was drunk with rage against Jesus and his church. Saul wielded what power he had in the way he knew to use power—through violent and brutal force. /

We meet Saul at the scene of a murder—the stoning of Stephen. Stephen's garments were laid at Saul's feet. Stephen was only the first of several victims in Saul's reign of terror. Luke tells us that 'Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.' /

It was on the Damascus Road, of course, that Paul learned he had no power when he encountered the Lord of heaven and earth. He learned that he was blind to

justice when God struck him blind, when he heard the voice of Jesus, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' /

God promised through Isaiah that the old song would become a new song. And one of the greatest vocalists he could choose was a man whose old name was Saul, whose new name was Paul. In Paul's voice the Song of the Vineyard had no bitter ending, but it became a Gospel song. No longer singing with fortissimo of rage, anger, and hatred, Paul sings as a man who knows that it takes much more power to sing softly.

He has no difficulty singing lyrics of his own humiliation, for his humiliation is his power in Christ, his hope for exaltation in Christ. Paul improvises the Song of the Vineyard for his own life. He is the first fruits of the new Israel:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

That is what the new, Gospel Song of the Vineyard sounds like. To sing your life story with humility and weakness takes incredible power. It is not a power we achieve through our intellect or willpower. It comes through 'knowing Christ, the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.'

So come Holy Spirit, come upon me, come upon this Church that we might be your faithful vineyard, trusting that in our weakness, your strength is made perfect; that in our failings, your grace saves to the uttermost; that in our injustice, you make all things just through Jesus; that in our humility, you will indeed produce within us the fruits of the kingdom for your Son to harvest in the fullness of time. This is our story, this is our song. All glory be unto You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.