

## Isaiah 5:1-7 “Interpreting the Good and the Bad”

Last week, I gave you a little glimpse into what it was like for a person who wasn't raised in the church to go out and find one after deciding to follow Jesus *apart* from the church. I came to faith through Campus Life/Youth for Christ, and Greg Johnson, the director of that ministry said that I couldn't fly solo on this journey of faith. I had to find a community of faith to help me along the way. So last week I talked about how part of the challenge was discovering the different ways churches worship God. This morning I want to focus on the different ways churches ... *deliver God's message* into the world.

Now I may have given the impression last week that there are only two ways churches worship – Way too formal, or way too informal. That's not the case, of course. There's a lot of room in between the two extremes. And I've got to be careful about how I describe my experience of receiving God's message this week, because if I'm not careful, I'm going to end up sounding like you either receive it like hot fudge on an ice cream sundae, or upside the head on the end of a 2x4. But sometimes you've got to look at both ends of the spectrum before you can appreciate the nuances of the middle, right?

So at the one extreme, you've got churches who seem to approach interpreting scriptures and communicating God's message in a lengthy, dry, boring, overly-academic way as if the preacher is trying to win you over by the power of reason. Almost like one would approach winning a debate club contest. It's all about the power of persuasive address and argumentation. Whoever has the most convincing skills in logic and rhetoric wins the day. At the other extreme, you've got those who approach interpreting scripture and delivering God's message in the same way that one who sells fire or flood insurance approaches potential customers. Whoever is able to convince the potential customer that their life is in imminent danger (unless they are insured) is the one who wins the day. One extreme has the dry-yet-bloated flavor of the clearance section of “The Great Courses” audiobooks while the other bears the

flavor of a late-night infomercial that promises that if you *buy right now*, you'll get a set of kitchen knives that you'll never have to sharpen.

Again, I'm over-generalizing here. I'm setting up two polar opposites to help you see that while there is a lot of room in the middle, how we often characterize the way churches deliver their good news is based on those two extremes. In my search for a faith community, I chose the Disciples, not because we're somewhere in the middle, but because you can go to four different Disciples churches in one major metropolitan city and experience about every flavor of church you could imagine. And if you didn't have a month to visit all four churches, you could just go to one of our General Assemblies, and get it all in one sitting! I think this has a lot to do with how we as Disciples value diversity. Last week I said that the Disciples are the first home-grown American-born Protestant denomination. And I think our diversity reflects the diversity of people who were on the American frontier when this movement was born. The Cane Ridge Revival that took place over the course of seven days in August of 1801 near Lexington, Kentucky was kind of the church equivalent of the Woodstock or Burning Man or Coachella music festivals. Variety was the norm, and that variety got passed down through the multitude of congregations that emerged because of that revival.

I say this all because in order for us to understand the scripture that we have in front of us this week, we've got to acknowledge that all these prophets that we've been studying for the last two months were not all cut from the same cookie cutter. The cookie dough was the same. That is, the foundation of their message to the people of Israel and Judah was the same. All of these prophets were saying, "You need to return to God or else you'll forget who you are and to whom you belong. When that happens, your nation will fall." That was it. The *difference* was in *how* the message was packaged. Remember our two angry-sounding prophets, Hosea and Amos? They were all about fire and famine and natural disasters and how Israel was like an unfaithful spouse who just couldn't stop breaking God's heart. Amos called out the corrupt King

Jeroboam by name. Amos called out the corrupt religious state that placed the King's agenda over God's agenda. Amos called out the corrupt citizens of the kingdom who were more concerned about their economic status and all the creature comforts that came with it. Hosea came along and spoke very plainly to Israel about how heartbroken God was concerning their idolatry. These prophets had us squirming and cringing in our seats over some of the language and imagery they used to communicate how far God's people had strayed. Shoot, they made us think about our own situation here in 21<sup>st</sup> Century North America. Which ... well ... that's the point of our holding scripture as sacred in our tradition. We *know* it will speak to God's people in all times and places. We expect scripture to help us face some of our contemporary challenges by helping us relate to the ones who received the prophets' words thousands of years ago.

What amazes me, and why I love studying scripture so much is that God uses so many different ways and means to communicate to God's people. In the same way that some people are turned off by hellfire and brimstone sermons today, there were folks just like them who lived in 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC Israel and Judah whose brains shut down whenever someone like Amos started in on the whole, "The moon will turn to blood and locusts will eat your crops" routine. Here's the cool thing though ... God didn't just send Amoses and Hoseas out to preach. God sent the Isaiahs too. Now don't get me wrong, Isaiah had some harsh things to say now and then. We got a taste of this last week when he *literally* said, "God is done with your bull." But we also heard Isaiah say, "Come, let us reason together."

We get a lot of that "come let us reason" preaching this week. How do you communicate God's message to a people who are overly concerned with the material wealth and the prosperity that comes along with being an agricultural super-power? How do you get through to people who value entertainment more than worship? You start your message with something like what Tom read: "Let me sing my beloved a love-song concerning his vineyard!" That might just grab the attention of the

person who shuts down when they hear, “Let me tell you about how dark the skies are going to get when the smoke from the fires that your enemies lit to lay waste to your cities covers the sun.” See the contrast? No doubt, there will be people more motivated by the doomsday message. That’s the only way some folks will actually listen. But for others? Isn’t it good that God cares enough to offer an alternative.

But before you think that this love-song about the vineyard is going to be a jolly little Beatles-sounding tune, let me remind you that there are also bands like Nazareth whose love songs remind us that sometimes “Love Hurts.” The core of the prophet’s message here is that God gave Israel and Judah everything they needed to make the sort of vineyard that would produce good wine. Everything was laid out perfectly. It was carefully excavated. It was planted with the very best vines. There was a watch tower for security. There was a beautifully hewn vat for all the good grapes that would eventually produce good wine. What more could you want? What more could you even have? You have everything. Everything to make it work. But instead of producing sweet wine grapes, the only thing that came out of the vineyard was sour wild grapes. What now? Well ... according to this love song, God responded to the people’s neglect by removing the hedge that protected the vineyard from being devoured. The wall that kept all the bad things out of the vineyard? Gone. No more protection. The grapes of justice were what was supposed to grow in this vineyard. But instead, the grapes of bloodshed and wrath took over.

“Let me sing you a little love song, okay? You may think you know the tune, but it’s going to be full of surprises. Thanks for listening though. Thanks for tuning in. While I’ve got you, let’s sing a little song about justice too.” See, that’s the beauty of prophetic tradition in the culture of God. God’s going to find the hook that will eventually catch your attention. And God will keep working at finding new ways of communicating the message until we’re ready and willing to listen.

Here's the tune I hear when I read this passage from Isaiah: It's frustrating when you give someone everything they need to succeed, but then they squander it. God gave Israel and Judah both everything they needed to make "justice wine." They had the right field, the right tools, the right soil, the right climate, the right *everything*. Yes, there was work that needed to be done. It is not easy to make justice wine. That takes some skill. But when you have everything you need to make justice wine *including a great instruction manual* and you *still* manage to let the vineyard get overrun with sour grapes, the fault's on you. Because the only wine that ever comes from wild grapes is bloodshed wine. Israel and Judah both disappointed God.

I don't know many people who outwardly enjoy disappointing others. I know I hate disappointing people. But I also know that it's inevitable. No matter how hard we try, we are going to disappoint someone whether we like it or not. Sometimes it takes zero effort on our parts to disappoint folks who we try very hard not to disappoint. And that's where we just have to learn that it's not our job to make everyone happy, and that the best any of us can do is to just take care of our own side of the street. But for those times when we *know* we've blown it? When we've been given everything we need to make something work, and have even been given instructions on how to make it work and then we choose to ignore the instructions because we think we know better? That's when I'm thankful that we serve a God who loves us to the extent God loves Israel and Judah. God loves those people so much that God sent a variety of prophets to deliver a message that at least some would hear when others may not. That says something about God's willingness to give us so many opportunities to repent and get it right. No matter how many times we disappoint God, we are given more chances than we might even deserve to get it right. And it is during this time and place in Israel and Judah's history that the love songs from Isaiah and other prophets start painting a picture of Jesus ... the one who would be God's very presence here on earth to give us what we need to mend and reconcile that broken relationship between God and God's

creation. Thanks be to God for these heroic prophets who laid the foundation for what and who was to come.