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SERMON

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Imagined Scarcity; Abundant Reality

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Early in Christian history, St Jerome began a tradition of calling the Book of Isaiah the fifth gospel. Christians tend to interpret the prophecy through the lens of Jesus as Messiah. To only consider those passages we read in Advent or hear in Handel's *Messiah* ignores the breadth of what Isaiah uttered on behalf of God thousands of years ago.

In the 8th century BCE, an import-export trade fueled economic growth in the ancient Near East, particularly for those who already possessed land and wealth. The growing demand in foreign markets for olive oil, wine, and wheat lured producers to acquire more lands for their production and sale. These basic economics persist today as we value year-over-year growth.

These commercial farms grew by acquiring adjacent lands from peasants who worked small plots to sustain their families, raising enough to feed livestock and something for the temple sacrifice.

Seeing their vulnerable plight, commercial farmers conspired with the ruling government to levy onerous taxes. By design the taxes exceeded any excess these small farms produced. Families became displaced. Homelessness increased and economic injustice grew. Was it legal to obtain lands this way? The government allowed it.¹

¹ Marvin Chaney, "Whose Sour Grapes? The addresses of Isaiah 5:1-7 in the Light of Political Economy," *Semeia*, no. 87 (March 1999), 105.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=6539668&site=ehost-live>.

This is when Isaiah asks, “But, what about in God’s eyes?”

Before we hear Isaiah’s parable, please pray with me.

God, quiet in us the noise of today, the news, the inflation, the market, so that we can turn our complete attention to your word. Startle us again with the truth contained in this parable, just as our ancestors were, so we share the abundance inherent in the majesty of your earth. Bless this reading and the meditations of all our hearts. Amen.

Listen for God’s living word as I read from Isaiah 5:1-8.

Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.

²He 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 winepress in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.

⁴What 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?

⁵And 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.

⁶I will make it a wild field;
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 hoped for justice,
but saw bloodshed;

for righteousness,
but look, wretchedness!

Ah, you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land!

Jesus told obscure parables that muddled his disciples at the time that we wrestle with today.

Parables in Hebrew Scriptures rarely exist. They also bite with clarity, from rhetorical traps masterfully set, drawing in the hearers, who unwittingly convict themselves.

The parable we heard today begins as a serenade to a beloved. God cultivated a lush vineyard with all the safety and substance for God's people to flourish. This enchanting ballade harkens to the covenant God made long ago.

"Sing me a love song" suddenly dissolves into a minor-key discord. Could you hear the angry tones if played on piano or organ? Israel had made a mockery of the covenant established by God and Abraham.

Isaiah paints an image of God in personal terms, not high upon a lofty hill, but one willing to labor, get their fingers dirty in the ground. And yet, rather than the vineyard responding with gratitude to this divine gardener, wild grapes emerged.

The translation of "wild" grapes from the Hebrew could more correctly be "sour" or "rotten" grapes, inedible for humans. This is also one of the few parables that unpacks its own meaning. The Israelites are the grapevines and the word-play stings.

In the ancient Hebrew, by merely changing one consonant, God's desire for "justice" becomes "bloodshed." Rather "righteousness" the people return "wretchedness."

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In this passage, Isaiah's accusations may sound as though coming from a judicial lawyer. Overall, the prophet functions as a marriage counselor.

Condemnation is not the goal, God wants a loving, mutual relationship. This picture of God in love with an entire people is unique among world religions. It testifies to the importance of passion for God, and critiques ultimate attachment to anything else.

Vineyards, no less than marriages, thrive not from rules but by cultivating tenderness from the patient and passionate wooing of a lover.²

Isaiah wants the people to know that God sees what they are doing; taking lands for themselves, displacing peasants through corrupt means, turning away from loving God to instead love their profits. And God wants them to change their destructive ways.

The wealthy landowner's injustice toward their peasant neighbors sets in motion the downfall of their entire community, including them. The wealthy fought for more and more money. They behaved as if blessings are scarce and the only way for one person to thrive is at the expense of the other.

² Jay Emerson Johnson, "Theological Perspective of Isaiah 5:1-7," *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4*, ed. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), pg. 126.

Tragically, this cycle of greed leading to ruin endures today.

Ivan Mischchenko's family laid every brick and pounded every nail to tend a farm near Kyiv, in a village called Pochebyn.

Putin ordered Russian planes and helicopters to bomb his and other small farms from the air, then three armored personnel carriers arrived to kill their livestock. When the Russians retreated, they left the village infested with landmines. To say the name Pochebyn conjures a village of terror. The only safe place to walk is the well-trod path created by the remaining animals.

This war to conquer land cost thousands of human lives in battle and caused agricultural ruin for Ukraine over \$30 billion. This scarcity creates more death in Ukraine and in countries from Morocco to Somalia and Indonesia, whose people, already in famine, rely upon their grain exports.

Once the fighting stopped, Ivan returned. He is a big man, who looks about like every Iowa farmer I've ever known. Grain cap. Weathered skin and calloused hands. Dungarees. He sings to his cows and smiles at the pigs, calling them by name, as he scratches their ears.

He claims, he will not leave, "it's us who preserves our country, culture, language. We give food and milk."

And like the farmers I know whose lives are tied to the land, he gets teary and pauses before choking out the words, “I will do this so one day children’s songs will be heard again.”³

So many aspects of our lives appear to be played as zero-sum game. In a zero-sum game, whatever is at stake exists in a fixed amount. The only way for you to have more means I have less.

More than fifty-year years ago, the *New York Times* published Milton Friedman’s essay, “The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits,” in which he stated “the business of business is business” fueling a laser focus on shareholder value. Full stop. His theories transformed the goal of public corporations. Generating profits reigns superior over and against cultivating employees and community. You only justify investing in other constituents if it accelerates profits.

You spend only the bare minimum required by law to eliminate pollution, and no more, regardless of what else might be done.

This Milton doctrine, as it became known, cautioned leaders away from leveraging their time and presence to personal

³Tara John and Angela Dewan, “Huge relief as Ukrainian grain shipped out, but the food crisis isn't going anywhere,” *CNN*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/05/europe/ukraine-grain-hunger-crisis-world-intl/index.html>.

causes at the expense of the company. For some, divorcing personal values from their work justified the erosion of moral character and generosity from public companies. “The business of business is only business.”

The culture in some institutions, condoned the practice that not only does one person need to perform well, but their career is served if someone else falters. Ouch. As if even professional growth is a zero-sum game.

That is not true of all enterprises, but in enough companies that I imagine some of you are nodding your heads from personal experience.

Beyond just work, various political factions fan the flames of this zero-sum mentality. Substantial swaths in our country’s population fear that broadening access to fair trials, encouraging all citizens to vote, improving access to education for minorities, will diminish their lives. If justice and freedom expand, some fear they will lose.

When we let such anxiety shape our actions, justice and freedom became scarce for everyone.

Throughout biblical history, we see the devastating impact of ignoring a bit of greed here and a minor injustice there, before the trend pardons loving money and not God or people.

When Israel fell, the Babylonian exile included everyone, rich and poor, righteous, and unjust. Over the long years of exile, they realized injustice tears at the lives who are denied justice and those who ignored injustice or participated in the system at the expense of others.

Ivan Mischchenko stands as a shining example of one man's commitment to live in a manner for others to flourish.

Contrary to the Friedman doctrine, many multi-national, publicly traded companies are also striving for a higher, moral ground.

Within weeks of the war, several large corporations left Russia to protect their workers. The exodus also sacrificed predictable profits. McDonalds closed their 840 stores in Russia and later sold them – yes, consumer pressure motivated the sale – but this company chose to not support a corrupt regime.

This past week, McDonald's reopened some the stores it had been forced to shutter in Ukraine. Their employees wanted to build some sense of normalcy by working, even though they had been receiving a salary. McDonalds claims to have paid more than 10,000 employees throughout the months they did not sell one Big Mac or Happy Meal.⁴

⁴ "McDonald's Will Reopen in Some Parts of Ukraine," *The New York Times*, B2, August 12, 2022.

God sang a love song in Isaiah. Jesus continues to sing the love song begun so long ago. In the Gospel of John, Jesus proclaims, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit.... Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.... (John 15)

To talk only of God's love and the grace revealed in Jesus Christ, the nice parts of Jesus's gift, without acknowledging his passion for justice, his courage to stand with those on the margins...to speak only of love and grace, without embracing our responsibility to pursue justice, without exception makes a mockery of his death and resurrection.

On the cross of Christ, once and for all, and for all eyes to see, the heart of God is laid bare, teaching us that without love for one another and respect for their welfare, an innocent man died.

Isaiah's prophecy and Jesus' call to be his church stirs so many questions before us. Will our legacy show we pursue more than what can only be measured in earnings per share?

Will we participate in cultivating God's majesty in this world, knowing that this will ask us to compromise with those whom we do not like or are of common mind about taxation, climate

change, or racism.⁵ A thirst for winner-take-all in politics wreaks havoc on all. God does not play a zero-sum game with covenants, as if divine blessings are a scarce commodity. God invites us to see and become part of an abundant reality.

⁵ Inspired by commentaries from WorkingPreacher.org.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=162

Good Lord, on our own, we conclude:
that there is not enough to go around,
that we are going to run short:
of money,
of love,
of grades,
of publications,
of members,
of years,
of life.

We should seize the day, seize the goods,
seize our neighbor's goods,
because there is not enough to go around.

And in the midst of our perceived deficit,
you come giving bread in the wilderness,
you come giving children at the eleventh hour,
you come giving homes to exiles,
you come giving futures to the shut-down,
you come giving Easter joy to the dead.

And we watch while the blind receive their sight,
the lame walk,
the deaf hear,
the poor dance and sing.

We watch, and we take food we did not grow,
and life we did not invent,
and future that is gift and gift and gift.

By your giving, break our cycles of imagined scarcity,
override our presumed deficits,
and help us to see the abundance:
mercy upon mercy,
blessing upon blessing.

– *Walter Brueggemann*



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