

“Thirsting World, Fine Vineyard, Harvest Expectations”¹
Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Isaiah 5:1-7 (NRSV, modified with literal translations)

¹Let 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 wine vat 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 worthless 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 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.

⁷For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;

he looked for justice, but behold: there was violent oppression;
he looked for righteousness, but behold: a cry of anguish.

Luke 12:1, 49-56

[¹When the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples:]

⁴⁹“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!

⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;

⁵³they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴He said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens.

⁵⁶You hypocrites! [Eugene Peterson translates, “Frauds!”]

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

³¹By faith Rahab did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? Time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³who through faith

conquered kingdoms, administered justice,

obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,

³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword,

won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war,

put foreign armies to flight.

³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection.

Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.

³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

³⁷They were [killed in horrible ways];
they went about in skins of sheep and goats,
destitute, persecuted, tormented—
[they] ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

^{12:1}Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,

let *us*, also, lay aside every weight
and the sin that clings so closely,
and let *us* run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,
who for the sake of the joy that was set before him

endured the cross, disregarding its shame,
and has taken his seat
at the right hand of the throne of God.

The Sermon

Three questions posed by the Word of God in Isaiah, Luke and the Letter to the Hebrews:

What do we have to say about who we are, and what we believe about the fact that we are here?

What good could that message do for people in the midst of everything people are dealing with right now?

And what is the Church offering to weary travelers looking for a respite, something to assure them that whatever messes we're in right now, things are not totally hopeless? Something that offers them good news that really is genuinely good news for everyone?

What do we have to say about what we believe;
what good could that message do for people;
and how is the Church delivering that good news?

Here is a cosmology:

God is the One Eternal Truth who willed the universe into being and brought creation to life.

It was God's plan that Jesus would be born and walk the earth, teaching and showing us what life is and what full humanity looks like, namely:

finding abundance in caring, giving, feeding, healing;
being in relationship, creating community,
sharing and sacrificing for the benefit of the whole.

Jesus embodied that truth all the way to the cross, and beyond. He verified that there is something immeasurably vast: greater, deeper, more beautiful and more real than we can even imagine, and it is for everyone.

He is, in real time, inviting all of us to embrace the eternal life now, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do so. God loves creation and everyone in it, and it is God's will that forgiveness, salvation and redemption be part of all creation, including every human life—including your human life, and mine.

That's at least a rough sketch of a "cosmology," a way of talking about the universe, life, and the unfolding of creation. It's Biblical, and it's good news.

And good news seems awfully hard to find these days—at least, good news that really is good news for everyone.

People are already having to cope with overlapping global crises that affect everybody—environmental, political, racial, medical, societal...

Then add in the agonies or the languishing that sometimes enter our lives and threaten to overcome us;

Then factor in just the simple, everyday minor injuries and disheartening disappointments.

People have a lot to deal with right now, and as if that weren't challenging enough, there's a particular kind of blaring noise these days that any message of hope has to work even harder to cut through.

Maybe that phenomenon can be spoken for in a moment in Julie Schumacher's comic novel, *The Shakespeare Requirement*, when an old professor on the campus of a fictitious Midwestern liberal arts college listens in on a student rally and thinks to himself: so this is where we're headed:

“Out with considered argument and nuance. In with publicity stunts, competitive righteousness, and the thrill of rage.”ⁱ

And all day, every day, everything is filtered, as constantly, and loudly, and attention-grabbingly as possible, through lenses of either self-righteous moral snobbery on one side, or belligerently arrogant ignorance on the other. And that all gets funneled out into the world using technological means that make it all but impossible to avoid having to hear.

And we can all say, with Psalm 123, “Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough

of contempt” (123:3).

(For the longest time, the title of this sermon was going to be: “Smug Liberals, Sneering Conservatives, Rotten Grapes, and a World Starving for Good News.” Surprisingly, that doesn’t look like much of a pick-me-up in the bulletin draft.)

This moment is crying out for good news to be proclaimed—news that really is good news for everyone—and the world doesn’t just need the proclamation:
we need

to see for ourselves tangible reasons why we should trust in it,
and to experience what it looks like when God’s good news is made real,

in our own individual lives

and in these larger global crises of pandemic and corruption
and poverty and racism and conspiracy theories and
everything else.

I have just come back from the life-changing gift of a sabbatical, during which time, like many of my colleagues this summer, I was encouraged, by the congregation I have the privilege of pastoring, to use that time for rest and restoration. In my case, that meant family time, travel, the arts and culture, monastic retreats, re-engaging old friendships and checking in on important places in my life, opportunities for deep reflection, and a great deal of worship.

I can tell you there are some amazing people and wonderful things going on out there in the world, people and churches and

ministries that are glorifying God and sharing the good news. I felt welcomed almost everywhere I went, and on some days and in some places, the water was cool and refreshing.

I must also tell you that I attended a lot of worship services in a lot of different places where the word “worship” was mainly aspirational.

And I mean they were trying; they really were. But I saw a lot of tired ministers. I saw exhausted congregations, liturgists who sounded lost and in over their heads, overstressed and often underpaid church educators and musicians. I saw, with enormous sympathy, a great many churches who are just tired.

It’s very difficult to be inspired by preaching that sounds like somebody has been given a test question for an exam whose result doesn’t actually matter very much to anybody anyway—when it sounds like the poor, exhausted preacher is just saying, “Here are some words that theoretically had something to do with this morning’s scripture passage.”

I’m not at all suggesting that we have preachers who don’t know how to do their job—and certainly not that I’m any better at mine; by a number of indicators, I am demonstrably not.

What I’m saying is that I’m eternally grateful to God and to you for an extended period of sabbath rest, and I’m saying that a lot of these poor servants are just drained.

And I am obligated to observe that tired churches and ministers produce tired, empty messages, and there are days when the evident fatigue results in worship services that left me thinking: if this were the first time I came to hear the Good News among the People of God, it would take an almost inconceivable and definitely incongruous act of the Holy Spirit to give me any cause whatsoever to think, “Wow, I need to hear more of this and commit my life to it.”

If that’s problematic because it sounds like it could be detrimental to the institutional church, I’m not worried. I’ve always liked to say that the Holy Spirit is working in spite of all my best efforts as a pastor. And as G.K. Chesterton said 100 years ago, “Christianity has died many times and risen again; it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”ⁱⁱ

The more urgent challenge is about what we are doing with the message with which we’ve been entrusted.

Prophesying against the oppression of the poor and other sins of Israel, Isaiah said:

“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 (עֲנָבִים, *enabim*, “good” grapes),

but it yielded (בְּאֵשִׁים, *bausim*), wild grapes—*bausim* in the Biblical Hebrew is also translated “worthless;” they’re grapes you can’t use, can’t eat, can’t press into wine. It’s etymologically related to other Biblical Hebrew words like *stinking* and *foul*. You can’t use those grapes for anything.

And, according to the prophecy, God says:

What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I haven’t done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield worthless grapes?...

However you define the word Church—ecumenically, institutionally, or in the sense of each one of us being the church and taking it out into the world—

we, the Church, have the unique charge and the most joyful, life-affirming gift, to take the message of who God is, and what human life is meant to be—and to absorb that message into our lives until we breathe it out with every breath,

and take it lovingly to our neighbor and throughout the world until we breathe no more.

In addition to powerful monastic stays, some inspiring worship, and some astonishing churches in various parts of this country and Western Europe, I was also able to do some things outside of a church context.

In Philadelphia, I saw two men in their late seventies blow the roof off the Wells Fargo Center in front of 15,000 people when some lifelong friends and I saw The Who on their latest triennial farewell tour. At 76 and 77, the two principles—the singer and the guitarist—put on as strong a show as I’ve ever seen or heard, and I don’t mean “for a couple of 77 year olds;” I mean as strong and genuinely emotional a show as I’ve ever seen or heard.

In a panicky subway station in Paris, when our tickets didn’t work and all the staff—and I mean literally all the staff—were apparently out on strike, so there was absolutely no one to turn to for help, a Parisian woman saw our confusion and could probably sense the clocks ticking in our heads as we absolutely had to make it to the next train station in time. We never got her name. But she verified that we were headed in the right direction, and totally inconvenienced herself by riding the metro with us to make sure we got off at the right stop to run for the Eurostar train. On a terrible day for the Paris metro, she made it a beautiful day for the Paris metro.

In England, Vivian and I walked endless, sweltering miles through stunning, silent countryside to find our way to a remote Cotswold village ignored by tourists, all the way to an even more remote 6th century Saxon church that a friendly docent in another church had tipped us off about two days earlier.

On the long slog back to the main road where we were to catch the one bus that would be available that evening to take us the

several miles to the town where we were staying, we were famished, thirsty and everything else you can imagine, and happened upon—that’s what you do in rural 16th century England, you “happen upon” a village hall.

Inside, in a fellowship hall, 24 or 28 older adults were playing bridge at tables around the room. I stepped up to the first table—looking like a total catastrophe—and quietly said, “We’re a couple of weary travelers—” and before I could say another word, a guy got up, led us to the kitchen, started tea for each of us and gave us plates and forks and introduced us to about five different cakes and some cookies that people had brought that day.

90 minutes later, as we were waiting for the bus on a lonely corner of a very fast road, suddenly a small car swerved to a stop right in front of us. The same guy and a friend got out of the car to move things out of the way, put us in, showed us some breathtaking parts of the area that no tourist gets to see, and dropped us at our inn in another town.

We went to a large scale opera at Lincoln Center; a thought-provoking new play in London about an English minister who takes an enormously controversial and unpopular stand; a Shakespeare play on Broadway—actually a few plays on Broadway;

and to understate things wildly, nobody was phoning it in.

Nobody was too tired; everybody worked together. The whole audience wore masks and it was clear Broadway has zero intention of going dark again if they can possibly help it, and if you *don't* want to do your part to make sure it doesn't happen again, you'll have to do so from outside the theatre. And whole audiences happily complied, because they understand how crucial this is.

I am not making a case that Christian worship ought to be a rock concert, a Broadway show, a tourist attraction, or an ancient ruin confined to small villages. As a matter of fact, I am opposed to each one of those approaches.

I'm simply observing that it's not too late for the vineyard.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus seems to be reacting to something he's been hearing. I wonder if somebody was saying things like I would be inclined to say: "Well, the most important thing is family. And we're all entitled to our own opinions. And can't we all just get along?"

And Jesus says some things that strike a dissonant chord:

"Did you think I came to bring peace to the earth?" This good news is too essential, it's too needed, it's too costly to be subsumed into the "whatever" category in the name of preserving existing human relationships. It matters too much to take second place. That's how important it is for all of us to deliver and embody this good news.

The New Testament letter to the Hebrews hurtles through centuries of the history of the People of God, pointing out the ways that so many saints had only faith to go on—and that it was enough. No matter what the challenges of the time, the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us lived out the Good News in every circumstance.

I hope you saw the footage the other day from a crucial Little League baseball game that would decide which of the two teams—one from Texas, one from Oklahoma—would move on to the Little League World Series. It was a huge game with massive implications for whoever won.

A kid from the Oklahoma team was up to bat, wearing a batter's helmet, when the pitch went astray and accidentally beamed him hard right on the earpiece. He spun around and hit the dirt. People rushed over to help.

Thank heaven, he was able to shake it off. He got up to a nice round of applause and trotted over to first base, which is what happens when the batter gets hit by a ball.

His nickname is Zay. Zay was at first base when he realized that the game seemed to have been paused. The pitcher, a talented kid named Kaiden Shelton, could not pull himself together after what had just happened.

You can find footage on Youtube of major league professional players, when they hit a ball out of bounds and it accidentally strikes somebody in the stands.

If it's a little kid who gets hit, you have never seen an adult athlete so emotionally shattered. Grown men, accustomed to being tough as nails, collapse in tears of guilt and remorse. Imagine what that feels like for a 12-year-old to accidentally hit another kid like that.

Zay sees that the pitcher is inconsolable, and in about the coolest move any athlete has made this century, he tosses away his batting helmet and runs over to the opposing pitcher who had just knocked him to the ground, and puts his arms around him.ⁱⁱⁱ

Zay, incidentally, is short for Isaiah. And when he was asked about it, he said to a reporter for CNN: "I wanted to go over there and spread God's love"—this is a direct quote—"and make sure that he's OK, and make sure that he knows that I'm OK and that I'll be OK."^{iv}

Kaiden, the 12-year-old pitcher from Texas, said, "I think the lesson is that you should care for other people. Like if they're down, you should just care for them, try to build them up."^v

What I'm saying is that it's not too late for the vineyard to produce a good, nurturing, abundant harvest.

What do we have to say about who we are, and what we believe about the fact that we are here?

What good might that message do for somebody in the midst of everything people are dealing with right now?

And what is the Church offering to weary travelers looking for something to assure them that whatever messes we're in right now, things are never hopeless—something that offers them good news that really is genuinely good news for everyone?

Will you pray with me...

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
August 14, 2022

ⁱ Julie Schumacher, *The Shakespeare Requirement*, Chapter 13, 14:33 (Audiobook), 2018

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 185

ⁱⁱⁱ [Little Leaguer consoles pitcher after getting hit in the head - YouTube](#)

^{iv} [Little League batter embraces opposing pitcher after getting hit in inspiring display of sportsmanship - CNN](#)

^v [Little League batter embraces opposing pitcher after getting hit in inspiring display of sportsmanship - CNN](#)