

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, April 10th, 2022
Palm Sunday

Solemn Evensong
4 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
On
Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 20:9-19
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Song of the Vineyard

There's a brilliant line in Tennessee Williams' short play "Suddenly Last Summer"
That has stuck with me and often returns to me
When I think about the parlous state of the world:
"We're all of us children in a vast kindergarten
trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks."
There's something so beautifully and poignantly absurd about that:
"Trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks."
We just can't help but get it wrong. Try as we might.
We can get close...maybe. But...
This is a vision, of course, a compelling, poetic and compassionate vision,
Of a death-weary and sin-sick humanity.
Of a fundamentally disoriented humanity.
We get a similar vision of that disorientation
In our readings this evening, particularly Isaiah.
And on this beginning of Holy Week
We're being invited into a radical re-orientation of our lives
Toward the cross, and the new life to which it leads.

"Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard."
Writes Isaiah. But it's a strange sort of lovesong we get.
It starts off well enough:
There's this rich and sensual imagery of the care the beloved takes in cultivating the vineyard,
The selection of the fertile ground,
The digging in the loamy earth, the painstaking removal of stones, the careful planting,
The building of a watchtower to keep it safe:
Imagine those hands after all that work, dirt-caked, sweat-speckled
The satisfied smile of the beloved looking at the vineyard
The eager plucking of a ripe red grape at harvest,
The burst of flavor on the tongue, but...not the expected sweetness:
Sourness, bitterness, rottenness
"he looked that it should bring forth grapes," says the singer, "and it brought forth wild grapes"

The shift in the poem is so sudden, so completely out of nowhere
And it comes with a shift in the narrative voice as well:
The beloved himself has arrived, not merely to end the lovesong, but to undo it completely
And from inside the song itself
“Judge I pray you betwixt me and my vineyard”
The Beloved sings with a broken heart.
“What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?” He laments.
But he answers his own question:
He will undo so much of the work of cultivation that he’s done
He’ll let the vineyard be what it had, apparently, always desired to be:
A thing of sour desolation and bitter wildness, choked by briars and thorns.
It’s a strange sort of lovesong that collapses in on itself.

Now—the passage ends with an explanation:
We’ve been treated to an allegory in which
The Beloved is God
And the vineyard is both Israel and Judah.
(And this vineyard imagery will recur throughout scripture as an image of God’s people.)
But there’s a part at the end of the passage
The end of verse 7
That’s really the key to the whole thing...
That suggests that the problem, the reason why everything falls apart,
Is a profoundly confused disorientation.
God “looked for judgment, but behold: oppression
For righteousness, but behold, a cry.”
The Hebrew, though, is a lot more suggestive:
God looked for mishpat, but behold mispach
Tsedakah, but heard tse’aqah.
They sound so similar, look so much alike.
It’s as if the prophet is suggesting
That the difference between judgment or justice and oppression (literally: bloodshed)
Between righteousness and screaming
Is just a matter of spelling...a few letters on a page.
It’s easy to get confused.
Sometimes
The prophet seems to suggest
We may intend justice
But wind up living lives blood-soaked and gore-spattered
And not even know it.
Sometimes
The prophet suggests
Our righteousness
Can wrest tortured cries from the victims of our benevolence,
And we can’t be bothered to hear it.
It’s possible, the prophet argues, for a people to have a habit of thinking that
It’s justice if the law allows it, if the authority does it;
It’s justice because they’ve got it coming to them, and they deserve it
(Whoever they are, and it changes),

It's righteous because that's just how it works and life's not fair but
Inequity's just part of the system and anyway I have nothing to do with it,
It's somebody else's problem.
Mishpat mispach Tsedaqah tse'aqah
Who, really, can tell the difference?
I mean you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, right.
You can't get law and order without knocking a few heads together
You can't do justice without a little bloodshed here and there
You just can't do righteousness without expecting someone to cry out.
I mean let's be realistic, right? We all want mishpat, justice
But one way or another, we'll settle for mispach, bloodshed.
As long as it's not our blood being shed.
That's just business as usual. Right?

Simone Weil, whom most of you know I love,
Puts it this way:

"As soon as we do evil, the evil appears as a sort of duty. Most people have a sense of duty about doing certain things that are bad and others that are good. The same man feels it to be a duty to sell for the highest price he can and not to steal, etc. Good for such people is on the level of evil. It is a good without light."

This profound disorientation that allows us to think we're doing the good
When in fact our "goodness" has no light

Is sin

At work

In us

And in the world around us.

And Beloved, as the righteous God loves righteousness and has nothing to do with sin,

God has nothing to do with a goodness without light,

With a death-centered justice that looks like bloodshed

With a vile and vicious death-dealing "righteousness"

And the One who is the Maker of All things and Judge of All Humanity

Will indeed show up in the midst of our song gone wrong, our story, our human experience,

To undo death and sin and injustice and unrighteousness from the inside.

In fact, that is just what God did in Jesus Christ, and what Holy Week and Easter are about.

In our Gospel, Jesus tells this story, this parable

Of the wicked tenants.

The set-up is the same as Isaiah's song:

A vinedresser putting a lot of love and care and attention into his vineyard.

But in Jesus' version of the metaphor here,

It's the workers in the vineyard that are the problem.

They covet the vineyard, and this drives them to oppression, abuse, and eventually murder,

The murder of the vinedresser's own son, the heir of the vineyard.

And here's where things get interesting.

Jesus asks, "What therefore shall the lord of the vineyard do?"

Jesus doesn't give them much time to respond before saying

"He shall come and destroy these husbandmen, and shall give the vineyard to others."

To which the authorities gasp, "God forbid."

In Matthew's version of the same story,
It's the authorities themselves who speak the doom of the husbandmen,
So here in Luke, it's as if Jesus is reading their minds and telling them their own thoughts:
Which horrifies them. Because they've an inkling, here, that this story may be about them.
And it is. It's about all of us. How we go. What we do. Who we are.
How we take justice and righteousness into our own blood-stained hands all the time.
And our greatest fear, is that someone, ultimately God, will do the same to us
Will do to us as we've done to others.
But then Jesus does something astonishing—or rather, what he *doesn't* do is astonishing:
He *doesn't* ratify our greatest fear. He changes the subject to shed greater light on it:
He asks, "What is this then that is written,
The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner?"
And he goes on to talk about what a scandal, a stumbling block, this cornerstone will be.
And what he's saying, really, to us, is this:
"You don't quite get it, do you.
More violence? More bloodshed?
All your anxious expectations of a wrath you're so afraid you deserve
That you can't manage to stop inflicting it on each other?
That's all you're about, isn't it.
But I have a different way. I *am* a different way. Says the Lord.
The world has rejected it and me. But this way is going to undo the world.
In my story, the story you can't yet tell, in my story:
The Murdered One returns.
And he reaches, with his nail-pierced hands, into the dry dust of your graves
And plucks you from the rotten and bitter clutches of the death you intended for him.
And he smiles and he holds you in his arms.
And whispers, 'Let me sing my lovesong for you.'
Because I have loved my vineyard so much," says Jesus, "That I have become the Vine.
I have loved you so much that I have lived your life and died your death ,
I have given you a forgiveness you could never earn
And carried your sins away from you as far as the east is from the west...
Not so that you could be serenely uninvolved.
Not so that you could return to business as usual.
But so that you could repent. And bear the fruits of repentance.
So you could actually do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God.
I am creating the world anew," says Our Lord,
"And my life, my love, my righteousness
Is the cornerstone of this new world."
This is the stone the builders rejected, that we humans rejected:
The righteousness of the Rejected One,
The Crucified, Thorn-Crowned, Risen One
That is given by grace, received through faith, lived in repentance,
In becoming a living site of the unfolding of God's death-defeating love,
God's sovereign justice, in the world.
This is the stone that breaks sin and its structures and grinds death to powder;
This is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that has entered our song, our world,
And overcome it all.

Beloved, let us be done with a goodness without light.
Let us, our lives, our communities, be built on the rejected stone.
As sin and death have disoriented us to love and life,
Let us allow the love, the life, the righteousness of Jesus Christ
To disorient us to the world and undo death in and through us.
Let us be a countersign
To the backbiting bloodshed and injustice on which the world sustains itself:
Our lives a sign of one world's end and another's new beginning.
As we do all this, as we become all this, by the grace of God working in us,
As we become agents and instances of a justice and a righteousness
Which is not of our own making,
But of God's giving...
How wonderful it will be to discover that the stone the builders rejected
Is, by God's good mercy, the cornerstone of our lives
And that instead of spelling God's name with alphabet blocks right or wrong
We discover God has spelled God's own name on our hearts and in our lives.
As we enter into Holy Week, let this be the Lord's doing in us
And let it be marvelous in our eyes.