

“Our Scarcity, God’s Faithfulness”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; November 17, 2019

Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5

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; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What 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? And 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. I 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. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!...

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Deborah and James Fallows travelled the U.S. together several years ago, visiting dozens of small to medium cities across the country to answer the question of what’s *working* in American civic life today. They wrote articles for The Atlantic along the way, and published a book about the trip called *Our Towns*. “They were particularly interested,” [according to reviewer Anthony Robinson](#), “in towns that had come back from decline, even devastation, when a whole economy had collapsed or a longtime major employer had left or closed. One of the key drivers of an economic comeback are the people they call ‘local patriots.’ ...In every lively community there were local patriots, people who came from all walks of life to provide leadership, energy, vision, and just plain hard work. Local patriots believe in their towns. They love their towns.”

The prophet Isaiah lived in his own time of devastation and disorientation. At the same time as last week’s Hosea was prophesying in Judah to the south, Isaiah lived in Israel to the north and watched its downfall. The great power of Assyria invaded and conquered Israel in 732 BCE and the northern kingdom ceased to exist. Why would a good and powerful God allow this to happen to God’s own people? The prophet says it’s because the nation bore false fruits.

Isaiah describes this using a metaphor about a farmer who works for years to make a pleasant vineyard. We see the work that goes into clearing stones, planting the best vines, and protecting them with wall and watchtower. But the vineyard is unproductive: instead of yielding grapes, it gives only wild fruit. Everything possible has been done to care for this vineyard, but it yields nothing. So the vine grower steps away from the project. Protective walls are pulled down and the vines trampled. Weeds will choke out what remains. Even the rain will stop, because this vineyard is no good. At the end of the parable, Isaiah explains: The vineyard is Israel, and God is the farmer. God has done everything to win the nation’s allegiance, but nothing comes from it. So now God’s people are faced with generations of exile and calamity.

But Isaiah is not only a doom-and-gloom prophet. Isaiah is what Deborah and James Fallows would call a “local patriot”. He believes in what’s possible for places of upheaval, disruption, decline and death.

Things are not what they appear to be, Isaiah suggests. God's good vineyard Israel has gone bad, yes, but in the places of destruction there will come forth new life. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse," Isaiah says in chapter eleven, "and a branch shall grow out of his roots." This new shoot is impervious to the sin, blight and mildew of the old vine. The Promised One stands infused instead with the spirit of God—with wisdom and understanding, with counsel and might; with knowledge and reverence for God. This green shoot—a promised leader—is the antithesis of the former injustice and death. Belts of righteousness and faithfulness encircle his waist. Justice and mercy are the hallmarks of this new ruler, who will reign forever and ever. Another way is possible, the local patriot Isaiah envisions, and he offers the hope of God's future to a people who can see only a dead vineyard.

To my knowledge, James and Deborah Fallows didn't spend a lot of time in churches as they travelled through towns across America. But churches experience the same hollowing-out and disorientation of cultural decline. At an event Friday night, our Conference Minister Shari Prestemon pointed out that of 130 churches in the Minnesota Conference, six have closed in the last six years. She highlights the changing demographics of rural communities to explain much of this, but congregations in every part of the state—including here—have seen the diminishment that comes at the end of 1500 years of Christendom. Gone are the so-called glory days when most people felt guilty to go to church, when churches had a monopoly on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. Isaiah the prophet would ask what had been accomplished with a well-tended vineyard that prefers to count the number of people inside rather than address the needs of God's justice and righteousness everywhere. Mainline Protestant churches have too often produced the wild fruits of institutionalism, status quo protectionism, ecological devastation, and white male privilege. For those and other reasons, the vineyard of Christendom has been broken down. But even as some would mourn the shrinking of this vine, Isaiah points us to God's faithfulness instead. Church *now* has an opportunity to be the green of God's new shoots growing from the stumps of former things—new life in places of apparent decline.

In order to succeed in that calling, Deborah and James Fallows would suggest, we'll need a crop of our own local patriots, people of "leadership, energy, vision, and just plain hard work." Fortunately, and by the grace of God, here you are! I marvel with gratitude at how many faithful, courageous people gather each week as the local patriots of Edina Morningside Church and community. We are drawn here today less from obligation and more from the conviction that God has good use of us in the world. We sing, speak and pray our praise in this assembly, and we see how God remains committed throughout our lives to raising up the green shoots of love, justice and righteousness. We show up again and again each week—to Bible study, rehearsals, service opportunities, trainings and public meetings—because we believe in the power of God to bring green shoots of joyful life from dry stumps in the church or the world. We commit our money, our time and our talents—not only today but every single week—so that God's deliverance continues to be manifest in this place. The story of God's faithfulness calls us together each week, and sends us out again with renewed hope. Thank you for being *our* local patriots, believing in the vital importance of churches like this one as a vehicle for God's faithfulness to continue transforming the world.

That might sound naïve or foolishly idealistic, especially if we've been drinking from the font of cynicism and apparent decline, but in fact it's exactly the way we would expect from the God whose loving justice is made radiantly visible in the undying life of Jesus Christ. God is the ultimate "local patriot", as Isaiah says, raising up new life in every place of dead shoots. Instead of walking away from failed vineyards, God brings new life into them. Even when bloodshed and terror take the place of justice and righteousness, even when all that was supposed to be good goes bad, God is faithful to transform, prune, and deliver. Even when God's heart breaks at the betrayal of life, God doesn't walk away. A green shoot comes up from the stump, and God works salvation anyway. We see this time and again throughout all of Scripture. God is faithful to protect the first disobedient humans rejected from Eden, stretching a

rainbow promise for Noah after the flood, giving words of conviction and leadership to timid Moses, forming new family for grieving Ruth and Naomi, singing to exiles, and bringing them home. When God's own Child was nailed to a cross and died by human hands, God rolled the stone away and broke open the path to eternal life—God is faithful. When the worst beasts of human terror and sin are unleashed into the world, God still judges the wrong and rescues out of love, wiping away tears from our eyes and putting a song in our hearts again. God is faithful—this is the essential Good News at the heart of our faith. Sin and crucifixion are never the end—forgiveness and resurrection await because God is faithful. Let us together commit to the life God asks of us here, pledging our selves most importantly and our stuff as well, then see what God can and will grow here next. Thanks be to God! Amen.