

**Bible Study**  
**Proper 15, Year C**  
**August 14, 2016**

**[RCL] Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56**

**Isaiah 5:1-7**

Isaiah's poetic lament is a masterful piece of irony that can be read on different levels. In its literal imagery, it speaks of the disappointment that must have been as well known to farmers in ancient Israel as it is in our own time: after days and weeks of tedious labor, one may find that the crop that appears is valueless. In metaphorical language that was common in the ancient world, though, planting and tending a vineyard could represent courtship. A man wooing a woman to be his wife did so, at least in part, in the hope that she would be a faithful and fruitful partner, bearing many strong children for his heritage. Verse 3 begins to reveal this bitter undertone, alluding to a relationship gone sour when it was founded on great hope.

If we read the "characters" in this story as the best man (the prophet, singing of his friend's plight), the bridegroom (Yahweh) and the faithless woman (Israel), suddenly the prophetic intent of Isaiah's poem becomes painfully clear. Speaking through the singer, Yahweh challenges the hearers to choose sides, to judge whether the relationship has been neglected. The story is told in such a way that almost anyone would sympathize with the disappointed suitor – setting the faithless people up to pass judgment against themselves! In verse 7, the identities are made clear, and so is the indictment: the vineyard will be destroyed, abandoned, because "he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry."

- In our human relationships, do we sometimes "get what we have coming to us?"
- Is that a reasonable model for the way in which God relates to God's people, or not?

**Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18**

The collection of the Psalms is so ancient that we can never really identify the composers or the dates of their composition. Still, they often give internal hints that provide a historical context. It is important to the setting of this psalm that verse 2 calls for the Lord to act "in the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh." These were among the smaller tribes of the northern kingdom – that portion of the Hebrew people who became identified as Israel when the Davidic monarchy broke apart. They cry out for rescue of "the vine" brought out of Egypt; here is the metaphor of planter and vineyard again! In the psalm, though, we hear the distressed cry of God's people when they find themselves indeed being broken down (v. 12), ravaged (v. 13), and burned like rubbish (v. 15). These references can almost certainly be connected to the invasion of the Assyrians who conquered and largely destroyed Israel in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

Paired as they are in the Lectionary, the Psalm offers us "the other side" of the relationship described in Isaiah. Now Israel really is suffering the punishment threatened in the prophecy, and they are raising – perhaps belatedly – a cry for mercy, restoration, and salvation.

- Why do we so often find ourselves with "20/20 hindsight?"
- How often is it really the result of naïvete?

- Are there times when we persist in acting in self-interest, until we discover that we have brought pain on ourselves and others – and realize it too late?

### **Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

The lessons from the Old Testament have been rather troubling, speaking of disappointment, estrangement, and retribution. The writer of Hebrews looks back through the checkered history of the Jewish people from a post-Resurrection perspective and calls his readers to recognize God's work even in the bleakest of times. In relating the stories of Abraham, Moses, and all the lesser heroes of Israel, the author acknowledges their suffering. The author weaves the thread of heroic faith throughout, though, reminding his audience that faith always leans forward into the unknown because of an unshakeable trust in God's goodness.

Jesus, by the example of his human life and by his divine transformation of shame and violence into victory over death's finality, became "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." (12:2) Each believer is now called to run the race with renewed assurance and hope, but we are also surrounded and encouraged by the "great cloud of witnesses" who lived faithfully in their own times, by the signs and promises they had received.

- What is the source of faith?
- Is its origin in logic? Is it based on our own experience?
- Does faith come from accepting the teaching or testimony of people we consider to have wisdom or authority?
- If all those sources of validation were stripped away, on what would you base your faith?

### **Luke 12:49-56**

Ouch! Jesus is not offering us much comfort and assurance in this passage. Within the book of Luke, chapter 12 falls within the long "journey narrative," in which most of Jesus's teaching and his confrontations with the religious establishment occur at various stages along the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. We are caught up in the growing intensity of his ministry and Luke's dramatic foreshadowing of the crucifixion that awaits him.

Here we return pointedly to the prophetic theme introduced in Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80. Jesus challenges us very directly to see beyond our rosy expectations and recognize the conflict inherent in being his followers – a conflict between God's reign and the world's values, between human loyalties and the call to follow something greater.

Our own expectations are not so different from those of Jesus's original hearers, who were holding out hope for a Messiah in the form of a great conquering warrior who would at last restore the kingdom of Israel on earth and usher in an era of peace and prosperity. Our modern version is the tendency to see Jesus as a benign, peaceful, and loyal friend who comforts and defends us. While he is all that, he is representing himself very differently here! His reference to bringing fire to the earth, and to bringing division rather than peace, tells us that a moment of crisis, of judgment, and of commitment awaits every believer who intends to take Jesus seriously.

Fire does not always imply destruction, but might also be an instrument of refinement – purifying, strengthening, and catalyzing us into a new being. Jesus’s baptism of fire and crisis of decision can mean his own impending trial and execution, or it can mean the turning point in our own lives when we are called to choose a path of discipleship that will bring with it some form of pain as well. Ultimately, like all of Jesus’ teachings, this lesson points us toward the full fruition of God’s kingdom – that redemption and salvation Jesus came to accomplish -- and calls us to live in hope and preparation for that time.

- How do these lectionary readings, taken together, bring a Gospel message that encompasses both judgment and hope, retribution and mercy?
- How do they ask us to broaden our understanding of faith?
- How do they show us a more vivid, more faithful way for living our own lives, within our own relationships?

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