

But Heard a Cry!

I mentioned last week that the Scripture passages in the Revised Common Lectionary over the last six weeks since I returned from vacation have led me to think a good deal about spiritual pride. In keeping with this theme, I've known for several weeks that this morning's sermon was going to focus on Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard," which we've just heard and, more to the point, on a kind of corporate spiritual pride to which we are prone here in the United States. I'm speaking now of exceptionalism, which Merriam-Webster defines as "the condition of being different from the norm," or, in this context, "a theory expounding the exceptionalism especially of a nation or region."

American exceptionalism has been a part of our national experience from as far back as 1630. That was the year when Puritan leader John Winthrop preached to his congregation while still aboard the ship *Arbella* that they had the opportunity to build in the New World, "a city upon a hill," creating a "model of Christian charity." From that time through the era of "Manifest Destiny" to the Ragan Revolution, when the film-star-turned-politician seized upon Winthrop's metaphor to promise America as a "shining city upon the hill," Americans have been fascinated with the idea that our nation is somehow blessed by God, set apart for greatness. Historically, we have used this concept not only as inspiration but also as excuse, not unlike Richard Nixon's assertion, "Well, if the President does it, it's not illegal." In the Nixon era, the cry of the conservative was "My country, right or wrong!" It was shorthand for saying, "whatever America does is all right because we are exceptional." Exceptionalism, both in the United States and in Isaiah's Judah, has been used to excuse some truly horrendous actions.

Isaiah's words about bloodshed and the cry of the victims were already uppermost in my mind last Monday morning when I sat down to eat breakfast and read the paper. There, on the front page of the *Seattle Times*, was a story about the current occupant of the White House berating his Secretary of State for actually trying to do his job and use diplomacy to defuse a dangerous confrontation with North Korea. Also on the front page and page two were stories of violence in the Spanish region of Catalonia, reports on terror attacks in Canada and France, violence in Cameroon, as well as senseless acts of violence in Las Vegas, where a speeding car killed three little boys on a sidewalk, and in Kansas, where three were killed and two wounded in unexplained gunfire. And then I put away the newspaper and went to my computer for some solace in the friendly world of Facebook, where I was almost immediately besieged by news of the awful violence in Las Vegas at a concert the night before. Bloodshed and a cry, indeed!

With that context for my writing in place, let us turn to our Scripture and to the context of its writing. Overall, the first part of our book of Isaiah is believed to have been written in the Southern Kingdom of Judah prior to the Babylonian exile. It is mostly a book of warning, reminding the people and especially the rulers of Judah that while they are indeed chosen and blessed by God that their continual refusal to follow the teachings of Torah will have grave consequences. In the chapters prior to our pericope for the morning, the word of the Lord through Isaiah continually warns the Judeans against their greed, their refusal to care for the vulnerable members of their society, their arrogance, and their rebellion against God. There are also words of peace and promise in those first four chapters but they are held out as a reminder of what faithful living according to God's will can produce. We need to remember that the Judah of Isaiah's time has seen the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria as well as their own near escape from the Assyrian forces. King Hezekiah heeds the warnings of

But Heard a Cry!

the prophet and makes wise ruling decisions but it is not long before his successors bring on the destruction that Isaiah warned of at the hands of the Babylonians.

In the opening verses of chapter five, Isaiah chooses to use and then subvert a metaphor familiar to his audience. Vineyards were cherished assets in that agrarian society and were symbols of peace and prosperity. One cannot do the hard and painstaking work of viticulture during war or when famine and poverty demand that every available inch of arable land be given over to growing crops with higher yield and less demand for water. In the First Book of Kings, the glorious reign of Solomon over the United Kingdoms is described as a time when “Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees.” This description is picked up as a promise for the future by both Isaiah and Micah. Psalm 80 describes Israel as Yahweh’s vine or vineyard and in Song of Songs, immediately before Isaiah in the Christian Old Testament, the Beloved is compared to a vineyard. If you read Song of Songs as an allegory of God’s love for Israel or Christ’s love for the Church, you can understand the association Isaiah is utilizing here – the Beloved’s vineyard stands for Yahweh’s Israel.

But Isaiah confounds the expectations of his listeners. Rather than describe the vineyard of Judah as Yahweh’s pride and joy, he tells a story of a major disappointment. The vineyard, for which so much is hoped, which has been planted with the best vines and given the highest care, produces inedible fruit. Its fate is to be left to the animals and to the weeds. And since the vineyard owner is Yahweh of Hosts, not even the rain will visit it. Isaiah delivers God’s rationale in language which, while memorable in English, would have been unforgettable in Hebrew. From the vineyard, God expected justice, *mishpat*, but saw bloodshed, *mispakh*, sought righteousness, *tsedaqah*, but heard a cry, *tse‘aqah*. To capture this in English, I recommend the translation of the New Jewish Publication Society:

He hoped for justice,
But behold, injustice;
For equity,
But behold, iniquity!

It’s worth noting that Jesus played with the image of Israel as vineyard as well. You may remember that last week’s parable of the man with two sons began with the father asking his sons to go and work in the vineyard. Directed as it was to the elders and chief priests, with the denouement being that they had been replaced as kingdom workers by prostitutes and enemy collaborators, Jesus’ use of the vineyard motif would have been shocking. Were I preaching from the Gospel for this Sunday, a similar lesson would pertain. I invite you to read later the story in Matthew 21:33-46. In that vineyard story, wicked tenants abuse and kill the landlord’s servants and even his only son. You will immediately make the connection to Israel as the vineyard with the landlord’s servants being the prophets and the landlord’s son standing in for Jesus himself.

Those who wish to appropriate for America the blessings of God upon Israel should take note for if we are to suggest that we as a nation are heirs of the promise then we must also accept that we are subject to the same conditions for blessing to which Israel was subject. The fact that the Children of Israel were the Chosen People of God did not exempt them from any part of God’s Law. Indeed, their chosen-ness was in large part God’s choice of them to display faithfulness to

But Heard a Cry!

God for the education and salvation of the nations. We are no more immune than Isaiah's Judah to God's judgment upon us for failure to care for the vulnerable, for greed, or for rebellion against justice and righteousness. I think it is ironic in the context of this passage that the original European name for our continent was Vinland. Historians have had proof since the 1960s that Leif Erikson visited North America nearly 500 years before that poser, Christopher Columbus, established a base and called it Vinland because of the rich variety of grapes and berries with which to make wine. Would Vinland have been a better example of God's vineyard than America had the Norse rather than the Spanish been the primary European presence in the exploratory period? Leif Erikson, after all, is well-known as the man who brought Christianity to the Viking settlements of Greenland. Sorry to disappoint the Scandinavians in the house but it's not likely. Leif's brother, Thorvald followed up on that initial settlement only to start a fight with the indigenous people and get himself killed. Historians speculate that one of the reasons that the Norse settlement was not permanent was that they could not restrain the warriors among them from hostilities against the natives, in which they were inevitably the losers.

Was it historically inevitable, then, that the original sin of America and what became the United States was genocidal violence followed closely by the kidnap and brutal enslavement of our African sisters and brothers? The leaders of Judah, King Hezekiah excepted, did not heed the warnings of Isaiah against violence, not even after the return from Exile. Jesus still taught the grim realities of the usurped vineyard half a millennium later. Now two millennia have passed since Christ's teachings and still Christians as blithely ignore God's call for peace and justice as did those who killed the prophets and the Christ in Jerusalem. There is good reason that the wise persons who compiled the stories of Genesis placed the tale of Cain's killing of Abel as the first post-lapsarian sin. There is good reason that the story of Noah gives this rationale for God's legendary destruction of humankind: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth."

The overwhelming evidence of history and Scripture alike make it clear that violence of all kinds, physical, emotional, economic, is a ready trap for all humankind, lurking at our door, as God tells Cain, and still we have not mastered it. Our history as a species makes it all the more ludicrous for America to claim an exceptionalism in this regard, proclaiming on the one hand that any violence done in our name is good and on the other that our hearts are so pure that we may leave the most awful weapons of mass slaughter available to anyone at any time with no detriment to our society. This is the rankest nonsense. While other industrialized (and supposedly civilized) nations put hard restrictions on the manufacture and private ownership of guns and sees real reduction in deaths by firearms as a result, American lawmakers trip over themselves rushing to satisfy the demands of the gun industry and their puppets not only for no sensible gun control but for an even greater proliferation of assault weapons, "self-defense" handguns, and even last week, silencers.

Some statistics and real facts are in order to gainsay the spurious claims of those opposed to common sense measures for the reduction of death by firearms. America has six times as many firearm homicides as Canada, and nearly 16 times as many as Germany. Why? Well, in large

But Heard a Cry!

part because we have so many more guns than any other country. America has 4.4 percent of the world's population, but almost half of the civilian-owned guns around the world. There have been more than 1,500 mass shootings since Sandy Hook. Remember Sandy Hook, when a domestic terrorist slaughtered 20 little children and seven adults, including his own mother? Remember how we all said that surely that would be a turning point for sensible gun legislation? In the U.S., states with more guns have more gun deaths and states with tighter gun control laws have fewer gun-related deaths; around the world, developed countries with more guns also have more gun deaths. This isn't rocket science, friends. Most gun deaths, by the way, are suicides and the states with the most guns report the most suicides. Programs that limit access to guns have decreased suicides.

This last fact has been especially proven true in Australia, where a mass shooting in 1996 spurred legislation which banned certain semi-automatic, self-loading rifles and shotguns, and imposed stricter licensing and registration requirements. It also instituted a mandatory buyback program for firearms banned by the 1996 law. During the buyback program, Australians sold 640,000 prohibited firearms to the government, and voluntarily surrendered about 60,000 non-prohibited firearms. Overall, the number of firearms in private hands was reduced by about 20 percent. What was the result? A drop in the number of gun-related homicides in that nation from 354 in the year the legislation was adopted to 273 in 2013, a 23 percent reduction. There have been no subsequent mass shootings in Australia and the gun-related suicide rate has decreased from 2.6 per 100,000 to 1.1 per 100,000. Fewer guns, fewer deaths. If you want to see my sources, the links are on the calendar insert in the bulletin.

I want to be sure that you hear me very clearly this morning. I am not insinuating that all firearms are of the devil. I am not calling out gun-owners as sinners. I come from a part of the country where hunting with guns and sport shooting are celebrated and, in the case of hunting, sometimes necessary to supplement a poverty diet. But that doesn't have anything to do with America's easy availability of guns that are meant only for the slaughter of other human beings, whether it is assault rifles, handguns, or sports firearms outfitted with high-capacity magazines and the now-infamous bump stocks. It is these weapons that we must eliminate from the streets of America. We must take common sense action. Ordinary citizens must clamor for change by their legislators. If you take the Sunday Seattle Times, look near the end of the front page section this morning for the responses of all of Washington State's elected leaders to a questionnaire about sensible gun control. See whose answers satisfy you and whose do not. Write letters or send e-mails or make phone calls supporting those legislators who will act and seeking to change the minds of those who won't. If you have friends or family in the districts that are problematic, ask them to write, too. Or, if you are looking to get involved, I recommend the local chapter of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. My friend Kristen Nyquist is involved and you can find the organization's web address and Kristen's e-mail address also on the calendar insert.

There is nothing wrong in wanting America to be exceptional but we should not seek exceptionalism in violence and death. Nor should we seek exceptionalism in injustice and iniquity. For the United States to live into the promise so many have seen in it, we should be seeking to be exceptional in following God's will, exceptional in loving our neighbors, exceptional in caring for the beautiful land and its creatures that are all around us. We should be

But Heard a Cry!

exceptional in guaranteeing justice and equity for our immigrants and our indigenous peoples, for our women and our children, for those whose ethnicity or skin color differentiate them from those of the dominant culture, for those who are differently abled and for those with mental illnesses. If we would truly be the vineyard of the Beloved, we must present to God the things which lead to life and to love. May God have mercy upon us for our failures and may God bless us with open hearts and strong minds to take action now.