

Blogging toward Sunday

By [Jo Bailey Wells](#)

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Gustave Doré, *The Prophet Isaiah*, 1866

I was teaching a class on Isaiah and we had reached chapter 40, "Every valley shall be exalted." A student piped up, "So Isaiah borrowed these words from Handel?" He was reading the Old Testament in the light of "new" history. In Isaiah I find it hard not to read the Old Testament in the light of the new—the New Testament, that is. Such a re-reading is fitting as long as we first allow the Old Testament to speak for itself.

And it does speak here. Let this passage not be read in our congregation with too much self-control—"Here beginneth the fifth chapter..." Rather let it come as what it is: the urgent cry of one who is heart-broken. Perhaps the reader should be someone recently bereaved, and pause for sobs of grief between paragraphs. Let's hear God's anguish—it might help shatter the common assumptions about divine impassibility. Certainly God feels pain!

The form is a love song, which Isaiah sings to Judah and Jerusalem on behalf of the God they have spurned. I think of it as if the prophet had been best man at the wedding. Now, at a point of crisis in the marriage, he acts as a third party—reminding the bride of the height and depth of God's devoted love. Until God can keep silence no longer, blurting in from verse 3. This lover is not proud: "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done?"

This lover does not wander off lightly. God gets cross, very cross. The anger is focused on the yield of *wild* grapes. Is it unreasonable to expect decent fruit from a vineyard that has received the very best tender loving care? If the anger seems disproportionate, we are probably underestimating the extent of this lover's devotion. God's anger is the flip-side of God's love. The anger brings destruction, rendering the vineyard as wild as the fruit it has borne.

How does one measure fruitfulness? In the parable of the sower, as also with the faithful/unfaithful servants, the focus is on the yield returned relative to the seed (or talent) sown. Here, in terms which are classic of an eighth-century prophet, the concern is with "justice and righteousness." Neither barns nor banks can measure these. The focus is on persons not things; and not just on individuals but on their social relations. This is counter to the Western mindset. Putting it another way, it begins to sound more familiar: the people of God are invited to fulfill their share in the covenant with God—to express their love of God—by the way in which they practice hospitality, generosity and equality with their neighbors. In the end, as ever, it comes down to whether we are sheep or goats.

The problem is—as the Hebrew of Isaiah expresses it—that our capacity for self-deception is very great. *Mishpakh* (bloodshed) can easily look just like *mishpat* (justice), and *tse'akah* (cry) can be made to sound similar to *tsedekah* (righteousness). Doesn't our history suggest we (the human race in general but especially those with wealth and power and "watchtowers") seek to defend the indefensible with reference to the same lofty rhetoric? That is the story of slavery by

slave owners; the story of apartheid according to the ruling white elite; and, in both these cases, the justification was made theologically.

How does one measure fruitfulness? If it's about social relations, we cannot measure this by ourselves. The harvest itself is about others sharing in it. We will need others to help taste our grape, to share a common cup.