

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 10.4.20

Isaiah 5:1-7/Philippians 4:6-9/Matthew 21:33-43

SING A BALLAD TO THE EARTH WE LOVE

Let's look more closely this morning at our first scripture reading from the prophet Isaiah. It's a very artistic portrait of the history of God's people. Which means that it has something to say to us today, since we are God's people – not in Isaiah's time, 750 BC, but in our challenging and unprecedented time, 2020 AD. Our reading starts out as a love song – like a balladeer or a minstrel serenading his lover:



*I'll sing a ballad to the one I love,
a love ballad about his vineyard:
The one I love had a vineyard,
a fine, well-placed vineyard.*

Think of the drive down Highway 29 in Napa – row after row of lush vines on the hillsides, a perfect grid no matter where your eyes focus. Such a beautiful picture that reflects the backbreaking hard work and tender care and devotion that goes into the cultivation of grape vines.

*He hoed the soil and pulled the weeds,
and planted the very best vines.
He built a lookout, built a winepress,
a vineyard to be proud of.*

Monica Chappel from our parish knows all about that hard work. Her family has owned vineyards in Livermore for several generations. And Ken Kosich from our community knows it too. I've gotten iPhone snapshots of Ken and his son and grandsons

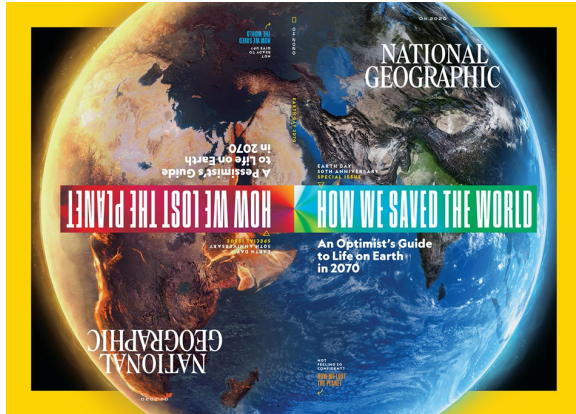
harvesting the grapes before dawn at their vineyard in Sonoma. I've heard that a vineyard owner has a special alarm next to his bed. When spring frost comes and the temperature drops too low, even in the middle of the night, the alarm goes off and the owner has to get up to start the wind machines to circulate the warmer air or the overhead sprinklers to melt the frost. Everything has to be done, as Isaiah describes, to guarantee a bountiful harvest.



But something goes wrong in our scripture tale and the love song ends on a discordant note. Not only was there no abundant harvest, but what came forth was wild grapes. *He looked for a vintage yield of grapes, but for all his pains he got junk grapes.* The unnatural yield wasn't the fault of poor cultivation on the part of the grower. The vineyard itself had failed. What started out as a picture of beauty ended in a scene of destruction:

*I'll tear down its fence. let it go to ruin.
I'll knock down the gate
and let it be trampled.
I'll turn it into a patch of weeds,
untended, uncared for –
thistles and thorns will take over.*

In commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, this year's April issue of *National Geographic* magazine published a "flip" issue of their magazine – basically, two issues in one – to explore two starkly different futures for our planet.



One half of the magazine presented the worst case scenario. That cover is titled: How We Lost the Planet – A Pessimist’s Guide to Life on Earth in 2070. That half of the magazine describes what Planet Earth will look like in fifty years if we do nothing substantive about climate change. The writers describe a grim, dangerous world of mass extinctions of animal species, searing forest fires, deadly heat waves, fierce storms, and widespread suffering for the human race.

The other half portrays a more hopeful, verdant vision titled: How We Saved the World - An Optimist’s Guide to Life on Earth in 2070. Those articles are about what Planet Earth could look like in fifty years if we harness our time, ingenuity, resources, and technology *now* to undo at least some of the damage we’ve already done. In this scenario, we would find sustainable ways to feed ourselves. We’d clean up our oceans, rivers, and lakes. We’d provide carbon-neutral energy for all. We’d reimagine our homes, streets, cities, and corporations in light of the most pressing needs of the environment. We’d begin to reverse climate change, and prevent many, if not most extinctions. We could once again become minstrels singing our love ballad to Mother Earth.

Matthew’s Gospel picks up on that popular scriptural theme – the people of Israel as God’s vineyard. His parable is an indictment against the corrupt religious leaders of his day -- obsessed with privilege and power -- who exploited and mistreated God’s people. What they forgot is that they didn’t own the vineyard. They were renters, caretakers of the fields that belonged to the landowner who only leased it to them with the expectation that they would do their best to care for vineyards so they would bring forth abundant fruit. They failed in their given task and reaped the consequences of their actions. *“Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit.”*

The analogy for us should be obvious. Haven’t we, like the tenants in the parable, deluded ourselves into thinking that we “own” the earth and all that’s in it, when in fact, we’re meant to be stewards only? Haven’t we, like the tenants, assumed that God is absent, or apathetic, or uninvolved — and hoarded the beauty and bounty of creation for our own selfish use, our own gain and convenience?



Haven’t we, like the tenants, ignored and even maligned the countless messengers who have warned us over the past many years that our greedy relationship with the planet will lead us to destruction?

Our consumer mentality and our sense of entitlement obscure the primary call of God to each of us to be good stewards of this earth which is our home – a gift from the Creator to be tended and cared for with love and devotion.

STEWARDSHIP *a way of life*

When it comes to our planet, the bottom line is crystal clear in Scripture: we are NOT owners. We are caretakers of a vineyard God cares about deeply, a vineyard that won't thrive or even survive if we continue to treat it as a cheap, inexhaustible commodity. We need only glance at environmental news headlines — "8.8 million tons of plastic waste enter the ocean each year," "a quarter of all mammals are currently threatened with extinction," "sea levels will rise by 1 to 8 feet by 2100" -- to recognize how precarious our situation really is.

Like you, I want very much to believe in the optimistic half of *National Geographic's* April magazine. As people of faith, we *do* believe that the earth will be renewed and restored. That somehow, God's coming kingdom will bring healing to all — even to all of creation. But we need to do our part as co-Creators with God. Our vocation of stewardship is lifelong, and our relationship to the landowner, our loving God, is eternal. Today, as people around the world celebrate the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, a 12th century monk who cared deeply about creation, who called the Sun his Brother and the Moon his Sister, we have a wonderful role model and example of stewardship to follow.

St. Francis once said: *What are the servants of the Lord but his minstrels!* Let's take up his song of praise for all Creation and do our part as faithful stewards of God's gift to us — this fragile planet we call home.



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