

### **A Tomato Grows in Brooklyn**

This morning we meet the prophet Isaiah. While scholars think that the larger book named for this prophet is the work of more than one person, here in the early chapters we hear the voice of Isaiah ben Amoz, or son of Amoz, a court prophet who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century in the southern kingdom of Judah. His career began as King Uzziah's was ending. During Uzziah's reign Judah grew in wealth and military power. The king eventually ran afoul of the priests and lived his final days suffering from leprosy and the disdain of the religious authorities. So it was a prosperous time for Judah if not a settled one. In the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and sent many of Israel's brightest lights into exile. The southern kingdom then forged a truce with Assyria, hoping to avoid their northern neighbor's fate. [Read Isaiah 5:1-7]

So it seems that in trying to save themselves, Judah lost their way. Through Isaiah we hear God describe the tender, loving care God showered on his vineyard, the people of ancient Israel. God faithfully weeded and watered, dressed the vines and encircled the pleasant planting with a protective wall. God had grand plans for a rich crop of good grapes that could be pressed and tended to create wine, a gift of bounty and celebration for the larger community. Instead what grew were what some translations tell us were wild grapes. Others tell us the grapes were rotten. In other words, these are not a fun, new exotic kind of grape that will soon show up on the shelves at Wegmans or Giant for a pretty price. No, these grapes are worthless and—according to the Hebrew—“stinking.” No fragrant bouquet, no lovely mouth feel. No, these grapes are good for absolutely nothing, and God is crushed. And just in case we are tempted to write all of it off to an uncomfortable metaphor, Isaiah makes it clear. God expected one thing, invested and slaved for one thing and in the end discovered another. God expected a people who would follow God's word and keep their end of the covenant made generations before. Instead God watched his beloved ones sell their birthright for a tenuous truce with a kingdom that had no interest in their well-being. God watched as his chosen ones traded “justice for jaundice” and swapped “righteousness for wretchedness,” as one translation reads.<sup>1</sup> God intended a covenant community that would

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2019) 636.

value right relationship with God and one another, a people who would strive to do what is fair and just, rather than what is expedient and convenient. And now God is staring down years of tending and weeding, pruning and planting, lavishing and loving, years that have amounted to row after row of putrid, useless grapes.

I confess that I wonder what God thinks when God looks at us. We are God's covenant community, or at least a tiny part of God's covenant community. I confess that much of the vineyard is a bit of a mess right now. I know I have made compromises and concessions when I could have been more faithful. I have picked and chosen where to stick my neck out and when to get my hands dirty. Recently, I have been tempted to avoid harsh words and difficult realities by watching cat videos or sweet sitcoms. I've dodged the difficult work, and truth be told, the church at large has, too. We have been slow to acknowledge the struggles of our brown, black, gay, and trans siblings. We have been too quick to want people to get over their frustrations and disappointments and too stubborn to listen to those who have said the old ways of doing things leave them cold and out in the cold. God still wants good grapes, not just for the pride of winning a blue ribbon at the Farm Show, but for the chance to throw a banquet where all of God's children eat and drink their fill at table together. God wants me, wants us to strive to be worthy of something bigger and grander than our own little walled-off world. And when we amount to no more than sullen, spoiled grapes, one might think that the story ends there.

[Read Isaiah 11:1-9]

When someone speaks of the East River in New York, I admit that my first thought is that is where one winds up if one crosses the mob in the movies. For decades the water was not safe for anyone or anything, but at some point people started advocating for the waterways to be less of a dumping ground and more of a treasured piece of the created world. And now, life is returning, including at least one lone tomato plant that sprouted this past summer on a piling right near the Brooklyn Bridge. It was quite literally new growth in the midst of a stump. The theory is that a seed was left behind, so to speak, by a bird that had feasted in someone's garden. The health of the waterways is a contributing factor to this amazing sight, however. More life means more birds, and more birds, it seems, mean more life. But the plant—which with its lone tomato, looked remarkably similar to Charlie Brown's Christmas tree after it is given some TLC—is not on the beaten path. Matt Frey, a kayaker came across it one day while out on his paddleboard. He thought someone had planted the

seed there intentionally, but the tomato plant seems to be a straight up gift from nature, a gift that sprouted “without the aid of any planter or gardener.”<sup>2</sup>

A few days later, someone told Matt about another tomato plant discovery. This time it was a plant bearing a clump of cherry tomatoes that was well-rooted deep in a hole on another piling in the river. While some scientists pointed out reasons that neither plant was the most robust they had seen, the first plant still had blossoms on it, “a wink at more to come.”<sup>3</sup> In the wake of his discoveries, Matt created a Twitter account for the plant, as you do. The tomato’s twitter feed has ventured off in a number of directions since then, but early on, it read:

There is only one of me. I am ripe. I will be gone soon; eaten, perhaps, by an errant seagull, or an enterprising squirrel. I may decay on the vine. It's okay.

I am pleased to inspire the city dwellers who are so fearful and angry now. They need tiny bursts of hope and happiness.<sup>4</sup>

Yes, we city dwellers and suburban dwellers and every dweller in between could use tiny bursts of hope and happiness. And through Isaiah, we are reminded of the great good news is that God, the exhausted and fed-up vineyard owner is still determined to hope for us, to give us winks—or at least one wink—of the new life to come.

In that second passage from Isaiah we hear not of a tomato blooming in Brooklyn, but of a stem, a sprout springing to life from a stump. It is not just any stump, but the seemingly dead wood from Jesse’s family tree, the same tree that gave us King David, the same one that was intended to bring blessing and honor to God and to the nations through the work and witness of God’s kingdom. It is an old story, I know. We have heard it all before. We have heard that God wants one thing and gets another, and that God still insists on bringing new life in the midst of dead ends. So maybe it is not new news. Maybe it is not something novel like a tomato plant in the East River. But it is good news, nonetheless. The best news, really, because it tells us that the dead ends

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<sup>2</sup> Amelia Nierenberg, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/04/dining/tomato-east-river-piling-brooklyn-bridge-park.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

<sup>3</sup> Nierenberg, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/dining/tomato-east-river-brooklyn.html?action=click&module=News&pgtype=Homepage>

<sup>4</sup> [https://twitter.com/east\\_tomato/status/1169418152947736576](https://twitter.com/east_tomato/status/1169418152947736576)

have reached their dead end. But we have a hard time trusting that to be true, because so often, too often we can only see the failing vineyard. Too much around us—and even within us—that is planted for good and cultivated for blessing winds up producing little that is worthy or worthwhile. We start to buy the nonsense that we and others are defined by our bank account or what we can achieve or secure or prove or conquer. We are wooed into thinking we are worthy because we one upped someone or put another in her place. We ridicule kindness as weakness and equate justice with everyone getting what they deserve, including us. We forget that love is not a transaction, that grace makes even less sense than a tomato growing in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge or a new branch sprouting from a dead and all-but-forgotten stump. Can we see signs of new life in unexpected places? Or have we stopped looking? This promise we hear from Isaiah may not be new news, but it is news we need to hear again and again, until we can know down in our core that it is true.

In the Christian tradition, we read this text and we hear Isaiah pointing to Jesus, the true heir to the throne of David, the one who is perfectly wise, compassionate, and faithful. But we also find ourselves wondering just where this new upside down creation is and if it is ever going to be a reality, because it doesn't seem to have made its way here yet. I'm not inclined to turn snakes loose in the nursery right now, nor do I want to be in the same space with a lion and a lamb anytime soon. We're not there yet. The Apostle Paul writes about creation's groaning in labor, waiting for something new to be born. We look and wait and long for a time when the child is in charge, the time when we will dwell together in peace on God's holy mountain.

And so the question comes back to us, are we able to trust that God has not given up on us? Do we believe that God still longs to do a new thing in and through us? The words of Isaiah are not captured here simply to record how disappointed God was with Judah or to offer hope only in one time to one people. As Assyria stands menacingly at Judah's gates, Isaiah speaks words of judgment *and* words of hope. All is not lost. We are not lost. A shoot, a tiny, tender sprout shall grow out of dead wood, and like those blossoms on that lone tomato plant in the East River, this tiny, tucked away shoot gives a holy and hopeful wink at more to come, for us and for all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.