

Mixing Metaphors: Gardens and Zoos

Let me sing for my loved one a love song for his vineyard.
My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.
He dug it,
 cleared away its stones,
 planted it with excellent vines,
 built a tower inside it,
 and dug out a wine vat in it.
He expected it to grow good grapes—
 but it grew rotten grapes.
So now, you who live in Jerusalem, you people of Judah,
 judge between me and my vineyard:
What more was there to do for my vineyard
 that I haven't done for it?
When I expected it to grow good grapes,
 why did it grow rotten grapes?
Now let me tell you what I'm doing to my vineyard.
I'm removing its hedge,
 so it will be destroyed.
I'm breaking down its walls,
 so it will be trampled.
I'll turn it into a ruin;
 it won't be pruned or hoed,
 and thorns and thistles will grow up.
I will command the clouds not to rain on it.
The vineyard of the LORD of heavenly forces is the house of Israel,
 and the people of Judah are the plantings in which God delighted.
God expected justice, but there was bloodshed;
 righteousness, but there was a cry of distress!

Is. 5:1-7 (C.E.B.)

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;
 a branch will sprout from his roots.
The LORD's spirit will rest upon him,
 a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 a spirit of planning and strength,
 a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.
He will delight in fearing the LORD.
He won't judge by appearances,
 nor decide by hearsay.
He will judge the needy with righteousness,
 and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.
He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;
 by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.
Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,
 and faithfulness the belt around his waist.
The wolf will live with the lamb,
 and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
 the calf and the young lion will feed together,
 and a little child will lead them.
The cow and the bear will graze.
 Their young will lie down together,

and a lion will eat straw like an ox.
A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.
They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,
just as the water covers the sea.
On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.

Is. 11:1-10 (C.E.B.)

For the children:

Do you know what this is? (*I have a rose bud.*)

Yes, it's a flower. It's a rose. It smells good, doesn't it?

And it's soft to touch. It's also very fragile – I mean it's easy to break the stem or pull off the petals and then it isn't so pretty. (I'll pull off some petals.)

Do you know what it means when you give someone a flower, especially a rose? It usually means the person giving the rose loves the person who is getting the rose. Sometimes people give different colors of roses for different meanings, but they all express love at some level.

In the song we're about to sing, it is God who gives us a rose.¹ Pretty cool. God loves us and shows it by giving us a rose. Except, it isn't a rose at all. It's Jesus.

Weird, huh?

Like a rose, Jesus comes to show us that God loves us.
It's weird, but I think I like it.

Let's pray:

God, thank you for loving us. Thank you for showing us your love by sending Jesus. Help us treat each other tenderly, like we do a rose, so people can see your love in us. Amen.

For the adults:

There are at least two primary metaphors in our text today: there is a vineyard in the first passage; there is a zoo in the second. The garden and the zoo are both vivid images that capture our imagination. So, what does it mean to put them side-by-side? What is to be learned from these mixed metaphors? What is God saying to us?

It gets even more complicated when we realize the first one seems to be set within the context of another metaphor, a love song (Is. 5:1).

After much puzzling over it and reflecting and listening to the voices of others, I realized these mixed metaphors are about God's love for us, a love that includes a yearning for our well-being, a yearning for peace, a yearning that may best be captured in a love song.

¹ We will be singing *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* (Voices Together, # 216).

In the first metaphor, the image of the garden – or more accurately the vineyard – God does everything right (Is. 5:4). Like a good farmer, God intentionally finds the most fertile place to plant the vines, and then provides the best environment possible for them to grow.

Some of you have done that yourselves. Some of you have done that on farms with wheat, corn and beans. Others have done that in backyard gardens with tomatoes and squash. Still others have done that with flower beds and indoor plants. I don't need to go into detail about the way the farmer takes exceptional care to choose a place to plant the seeds, looking for the appropriate sunshine and drainage. I don't need to talk about the importance of timing the planting so the growing season can be maximized. I don't need to go into detail because you've done it yourself. You know the kind of care the farmer takes.

But if that's all you hear in this passage, you've missed the point. This is a metaphor about love, remember? It's more like the Song of Solomon where the Lover looks at the beauty of the one he loves and smells the fragrance of the blossoms on the vine and imagines the fruit yet to be tasted (see SS. 7:8, for example).

The garden metaphor becomes the content of a love song.

- It could be about the love of a man and a woman who hope to become a husband and a wife. They find romantic places to meet and talk so their lives will grow.
- It could also be the love of a parent for a child. What parent does not do everything in their power to provide a nurturing environment for their children? I've known people who move to a different location so their children will have better schools to attend, I'm sure you have, too.

Isaiah is telling us about the lover who does whatever can be done for the one he loves. He uses the image of a garden to convey the sense of care the gardener has for the vine.

But then this love song turns into a country western song about love gone wrong. It's so bad, in fact, that the lover breaks out of the metaphor and begins to ask the audience what they would do (Is. 5:3-4)! After all the care the lover has given to his beloved, she turns her back on him.

The man and the woman are no longer headed for the wedding chapel. In fact, the best man is aghast as the groom asks the wedding guests what he should do since his bride has been unfaithful!

There will certainly be no "happily ever after" in this story; there can be no peace in this household.

The obvious solution for the farmer is to throw out the plants. Tear out the vines and start over. Find another place to grow a garden. Find a new source of seed. We might easily join in the opinion of the lover and agree he should give up on this love and find another. It is the only way to find peace.

That's when Isaiah points out the obvious. We are the ones who have not produced good fruit. God has expressed a deep love for us and we have produced nothing but sour grapes (Is. 5:4).

Later in Isaiah's book, he will offer another love song about another vineyard (Is. 27:2-6). That leads me to believe that this particular vineyard Isaiah tells us about is not necessarily the end of the story; it is only a possible ending, an ending God does not want. This is not a prophecy in the sense that Isaiah is predicting an outcome; he is merely warning of the possibilities if we continue down the same path.

In other words, there are alternate possibilities. And at least one of those possibilities includes a new metaphor. Leaving behind the garden, we encounter images more suited for a zoo. But it is still a metaphor

about God’s love for us, about God’s longings for us, about God’s desires for us to live in a loving relationship with God and with each other, about God’s yearning for us to live in peace.

It may be helpful to point out that in between these two passages, Isaiah also uses the metaphor of a forest to warn us that God will cut down all the “trees,” meaning those in positions of authority and leadership (Is. 10:33). With those words still ringing in their ears, I’m not sure anyone is ready to hear what Isaiah has to say now. Isaiah may say the enemy army is God’s punishment for the sour grapes they have been producing. No one wants to hear that.

Whether they are ready to listen or not, Isaiah speaks again. And the focus is no longer on the sin of the people and the devastation that is deserved. Instead, the focus is on the miraculous grace of God that allows another tree to grow out of the stumps that have been cut bare (Is. 11:1).

Reconciliation will be made possible, not only between God and the people, not only between people and the planet, but also between people of various tribes and nations.

Even between Jayhawks and Wildcats. 😊

Even between Ukrainians and Russians.

Even between Palestinians and Israelis.

Even between Democrats and Republicans, if you can believe that!

Reconciliation is possible for the garden and the zoo, because both are about the unfathomable and unknowable love of God and God’s desire for our well-being.

By the way, the image of the zoo leads to a moment of insight for me. If Isaiah uses a tree as a metaphor for leaders, what if the animals are also metaphors, metaphors of tribes and nations?

- Could Isaiah’s image be about the Bear of Russia living in peace with the Cow of India?
- What if he is suggesting the American Eagle can work in harmony with the Chinese Tiger?
- What if the Israeli Lion is being asked to lie down with the Palestinian Lamb?

What if God is reminding us that we have a common heritage, a common humanity, a common connection as beloved children of the same God, children who have been planted side by side in the same garden?

- What if, instead of conflict, we began to work side by side to address issues of hunger and environmental devastation?
- What if we began to work together to care about all human beings, no matter where they were born or what the color of their skin or their abilities and disabilities or their sexual orientation?

It may not seem possible. But impossible before.

I have a picture to share with you. The is about a grizzly bear in a wildlife preserve that



things have happened

story behind the picture befriended a stray cat.²

The two first met while the bear was caretaker saw the cat, he thought, “O, this isn’t was sure the bear would eat the cat. Instead, the bear took a piece of chicken out of his bowl and gave it to the cat! There was no human intervention; it was simply a hungry cat that befriended a grizzly bear who was eating his dinner.

² Patty Donovan. “Kitty came to dinner at bear’s pen – and lived.” The Seattle Times, Sunday, December 17, 1995.

You can make of that story what you will. To me, it is an incredible reminder that reconciliation can take place, even when we think it's not possible.

And believe me, I know there are situations where it doesn't seem possible.

- There is controversy surrounding the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.
- There is controversy over how congress is being run.
- There is controversy over the best way to address gun violence.

And those are just headlines from last week's newspapers! It doesn't begin to address the ongoing tensions that have become the backdrop for the news.

Would it surprise you to know there is a similar kind of tension going on in Israel when Isaiah writes? The Assyrian army is approaching, and the people are not in agreement about how to respond. Some want to run. Some want to stay and fight. Some want to enlist the support of other foreign powers.

It is in the midst of the tension and turmoil that Isaiah speaks.

Isaiah reminds the people that grace is at work, and because of that, we can rest in the assurance that there can be and will be peace. That is true in the larger stories of life as well as our individual stories.

We all face choices at Thanksgiving, including the choice of whether, or not to invite that one relative, you know, the one no one wants to spend time with.

- Maybe politics causes division between you.
- Maybe it's a difference in your views on gun control.
- Maybe it's a disagreement about how to raise children.
- Maybe it's an old hurt from an old family feud.

Whatever separates you, whatever makes it a difficult choice, maybe Isaiah's message is to find a way to sit at the same table, to share the same meal, to give thanks for the same love we have all received.

It may not seem possible.

It may not take place this year.

But it cannot take place until we make room for everyone.

Maybe it will allow God to start singing a new love song about a new garden where roses grow alongside pineapples and vines produce the most luscious grapes imaginable.

You see, I believe God's yearning, God's desire, is expressed in the story of the gardener who seeks the well-being of the vine, who envisions a zoo where bears and kittens share meals.

That is what Isaiah invites us to experience. It is also the reason Jesus was born, to reconcile us with God and with each other, to give us a future filled with peace.

May that peace begin today.

Amen.

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