

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
“What’s This ‘Trampling of the Vintage’ All About?”  
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper  
Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 5:1-7  
Christian Scripture: Luke 12:49-56  
Sunday, 18 August 2019



Again, it seems as if I am carrying-on with my sermon series on prophets. It seems, again, that I am also carrying-on a sub-theme of the Civil War. Recall, the fifth minister of our church, The Reverend George Tyler, preached a eulogy following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and quoted Lincoln’s second inaugural address that tried to explain the wartime deaths of approximately 620,000 people. Lincoln, quoting from the Psalmist (Psalm 19:9<sup>1</sup>), suggested it was the

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<sup>1</sup> “The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous”.

judgement of Lord, a punishment, an atonement of sorts, for the United States' 'Original Sin' of racism and slavery.



Two-hundred and fifty years of kidnapping, rape, murder, violence, and forced unremunerated labor, in eyes of the Psalmist and in the eyes of Lincoln, needed to somehow be repaid. That 'somehow' was The Civil War. Brother against brother. But, again, this morning I am only preaching that which the lectionary calendar suggests - nothing more, nothing less.



And the topic of division is still relevant, for as I wrote my sermon yesterday, violence erupted in Portland, Oregon: Far-right fought against far-left, fascist against anti-fascist, conservative against liberal; call the sides what you will.



This morning I seek to interpret a hymn that articulates a theology expressed by the Psalmist, Lincoln, and the composer of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”, Julia Ward Howe. The first stanza actually says it all: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”. Sounds like Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. “He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword; His truth is marching-on.”



For the prophets and much of Christian scriptures, the Day of Lord is viewed as a paradox, both to be welcomed (‘when the lion shall lie down with the lamb’, often misquoted in Isaiah 11:6) and a day of dread (“when there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”, Matthew 8:12 and others).



The rest of the stanzas are a gobsmackingly beautiful tribute to a theology that understands that God’s judgement is often violent, judgemental, cathartic, triumphant, victorious and a ruthless sanitization of evil. In our hymn, this judgment of God is manifested through fantastic carnage, apocalyptic violence (at least to those in the thick of battle), the brutality of armies (the Union army to be specific), and to be more specific, in the burning of Atlanta and Sherman’s march to the sea. Hence we sing stirring words that evoke images of armies encamped, marching, and killing. Though the words are beautiful and the lyrics haunting, it is a theology of which I have deep concerns and of which I am critical.



When I first told my mentor, Roger Brown, I was preaching on the theology of the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’, he blurted, “Goodness gracious, that’s terrible theology”. I agree with Roger.



It should be very obvious to you that our hymn is sourced, in part, from the fifth chapter of Isaiah. God creates, grows, nurtures, fertilizes, prunes and cultivates a vineyard. The vineyard is symbolic of the kingdom of God. It is that which God intended. In our scripture from Isaiah, God stated that he has offered and nurtured the kingdom of God, but lamented that the people of Israel have neglected it. That neglect, indeed the denial of the kingdom of God, has resulted in a forfeiture of God’s covenantal protection. The abandonment of the kingdom yielded a field that bares only rotten fruit (or ‘wild’ grapes). The theology of the Psalmist, of Lincoln, of Isaiah, and of our hymn is one that declares that God will ravage the vineyard, lay it to waste, raise it, uproot it, and thus destroy it (“he is trampling out the vintage”). Again, this is a theology with which I have concerns and thus I critique this morning.



The reading from our Christian scripture this morning is as troubling as the one we read in Isaiah. The so-called 'Prince of Peace' declared that he has come not to bring peace, but division. Huh? Tell, me this is not jarring! It is very jarring. And just to twist the sword deeper, Jesus invokes that which is most sacred and holy to us: family - he has come to divide even that!



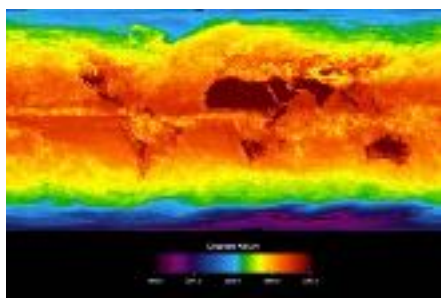
Before coming to you last year, I read two biographies on Ulysses S. Grant. Grant fascinates me because he led the largest army in the history of humankind against the South while married to a southerner whose family not only owned slaves, but whose father supported the southern cause throughout the Civil War and even into his son-in-law's presidency. Grant subjected himself to accommodating a crotchety, complaining, criticising southern sympathizer with his family in the White House. For this reason, and this reason alone, I almost consider

Grant a saint. When reading Luke's gospel about the divisions of families, I recall the Civil War, when friends, classmates, colleagues, and families found themselves on different sides of the conflict. Today, we also find families divided ideologically and politically. Do we not?

So, what are my concerns about our two scriptures and why do I critique them? But, more important than my criticisms, how do I interpret our two scriptures in light of their difficulties?



I interpret the calamities envisioned by Isaiah not as God's *wrath*, but rather as *consequences* of greedy, short-sighted, ignorant, and faith-less decisions that fail to treat all people equally. In short, not wrath, but consequences result from our disobedience of God's intentions. As more people own guns, the more we will see gun violence.



The longer we entertain climate change denialists at the highest level of our government, the more we will see larger natural disasters and the faster ecocide will ravage us. The longer we have leaders who divide, scapegoat, and vomit prejudice and fear, the more likely we will have a civil war in our country. How do I interpret our scripture from Isaiah? We will destroy our own vineyard - God need not do it for us.



How do I interpret Jesus' shocking declaration that he has come to sow division, not peace? I interpret Jesus' declaration *not* as an intention; division is not his intention. Rather, division is a *consequence* of our country's decision to substitute 'The New Colossus' (the words inscribed at the Statue of Liberty) with an amended version that limits acceptance into our union according to religious, racial, or economic criteria.





I fear that in the coming years, a civil war will erupt when communists, socialists, capitalists, and libertarians will all see one another as enemies rather than faithful citizens with legitimate varying perspectives.



Despite the seeming doom and gloom of Isaiah, Jesus, and Julia Ward Howe, all of them end with hope. While I quarrel with a perspective that understands that God causes calamities or that Jesus intends to divide, I fully believe and support the message of optimism in which all three conclude. Isaiah in time offered words of comfort to the people and proclaimed God's victory: "Every valley shall be raised

up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all humankind together will see it” (Isaiah 40:4-5).



In the gospel of Luke, Jesus met with his disciples and told them, “I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom [...]” (Luke 22:29-30).



And the refrain of our hymn also ends on the same optimistic note, despite warning us of the terrible consequences of our collective sin:

“Glory, glory, hallelujah. Glory, glory, hallelujah. Glory, glory, hallelujah, God’s truth is marching on”.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.