

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 10.4.20

**Isaiah 5:1-7**

1 Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. <sup>2</sup>He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. <sup>3</sup>And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. <sup>4</sup>What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? <sup>5</sup>And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. <sup>6</sup>I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. <sup>7</sup>For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

**Philippians 3:10-14**

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup>Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (497)

Someone posted on Twitter on Friday the opening paragraphs of Walker Percy's 1971 novel *Love in the Ruins*. Here they are.

"Now, in these dread latter days of the old, violent, beloved U.S.A., and the Christ-forgetting, Christ-haunted, death-dealing Western world, I came to myself in a grove of young pines, and the question came to me: has it happened at last?

"Two more hours should tell the story. One way or the other. Either I am right, and a catastrophe will occur; or it won't, and I'm crazy. In either case, the outlook is not so good.

"...Undoubtedly something is about to happen.

"Or is it that something has stopped happening?

"Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. and what we feel now is just the clank of the old historical machinery, the sudden jerking ahead of the roller-coaster cars as the chain catches hold and carries us back into history with its ordinary catastrophes, carries us out and up toward the brink from that felicitous and privileged siding where even unbelievers admitted that, if it was not God who blessed the U.S.A., then at least some great good luck had

befallen us, and that now the blessing or the luck is over, the machinery clanks, the chain catches hold, and the cars jerk forward...”

This sort of question is a time-worn one—whether the downfall or degradation of a nation is evidence of God’s withdrawing God’s blessing from that nation. This is a time-worn question, but it’s one *I’ve* never really considered. Too anti-modern, too potentially nationalistic, even jingoistic, the question as to whether God was blessing this nation (which isn’t really a *nation* at all, which is to say it’s not a bloodline but is a country, a land with a collection of people living its midst) is a question I’d leave to other sorts of Christians to ask, the televangelists who foretell God’s condemnation because of feminism or something.

Certainly, though, it’s classic Christian doctrine that God sustains, that God is sustainer. Sustaining: this is the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. Sustaining: this is the mode of God at work in history and the creation. The Holy Spirit as the Sustainer: this one’s action is in the appearance of the hidden eternal truth behind all things, in the individual manifestation of the eternal form and purpose, the *logos* which is the logic and intelligibility of all things. The breadness of any lump of bread, the songness of any given song, the treeness of each and every tree, the community-ness that quickens any actual occurrence of community: these are all by virtue of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer, this, the hidden, but essential, ingredient that makes of a thing the occurrence of that thing.

This is classic Christian doctrine.

Certainly, then, it stands to reason, that the continued sustaining of an entity suggests God’s sustaining presence there.

Certainly, also then, the ceasing to continue of an entity might suggest the withdrawal of God’s sustaining presence.

You’ve heard it said of someone just died, of their body, “That isn’t Aunt Betty. That isn’t cousin Hank.” The sustainer has departed and left behind something else.

But I guess I didn’t like to contemplate God as ever withdrawing Godself. I guess I only liked to contemplate God as presence, and not as withdrawal.

And (full confession) I *know* I blanched at the notion that God would actually bless America, was actually blessing the United States of America, and sustaining the United States of America. I blanched at this, though certainly our country is a spiritual entity. In that it’s by virtue

of the consent of the governed that it exists at all, that consent being a spiritual thing; and in that it's by virtue of a constitution, mere words, though which are made powerful to hold for our ratifying them and ordaining them: our country is a speech-act, which is itself a mystical, spiritual thing. It is founded on words. Amazing!

And yet I've blanched.

The thing is, too, the prophets at least considered God as either blessing and sustaining, or as withdrawing blessing and sustaining action, all the time—and especially as regarded the people, the nation. That was, in fact, basically their *modus operandi*. Beginning with the received wisdom that God had called Israel and Judah to be a particular sort of people, the prophets recognized that in so being there would be blessing.

God had called the people into being.

God had commanded them to behave justly, to care for the poor in their midst, to see to the orphan and the widow, to practice hospitality as regards strangers, to honor the sabbath that all creation might rest from their labors, might be free of exploitation, and might participate in the action and nature of God, who also rests on the Sabbath.

And God would bless them with good fortune if they lived as they'd been commanded. Really, what we might understand as natural consequences, the prophets understood as the abounding nature of a beloved community, the positive sum game that life can be when its currency is self-giving love, the sort of thing you can't spend down because it abounds. You remember the song: "Love is something, if you give it away, you end up having more. It's just like a magic penny. Hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so any they'll roll all over the floor." We sang that all the time in music class. We made fun of Mrs. Walker for having us sing it all the time. And yet here I am, quoting it while the world teeters and words fail for all our abuse of them.

To the prophets, then, the sustained presence of the nation could be seen as evidence of God's blessing and sustaining, while the teetering of the nation could be seen as evidence of God's withdrawing God's blessing—which is where we find ourselves with most of the prophets. Speaking to the ages from a moment of crisis, most of the biblical prophets have basically this to prophesy: "Get yourselves right, Israel, Judah; or consider yourselves finished." It's no guarantee, God's

favor; this is a favor that comes with demands. Forget those demands, and God will move on—Babylon, Assyria, the ebbing and flowing of power in history.

Isaiah asked it explicitly quite a lot. Today, we hear him speaking from the time prior to the downfall of the Judah. This long book of prophecy, which is actually three books of prophecy stitched together, speaks first from the time prior to the downfall, then from amidst the downfall and subsequent exile, and at last from the time of rebuilding and resettling in the land, spanning 150 years or so.

Here, with First Isaiah, we begin to imagine what's to come.

God had built a vineyard of the land for the people. God had made it beautiful and fruitful for his beloved. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. And he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes, which grow like weeds and set down roots such that the only way to get rid of them is to eradicate them and everything, a thorough-going ripping up and tearing down so to start again.

“And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard,” Isaiah said the Lord said. “I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste...For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; he expected righteousness, but heard a cry!”

It was very clear to Isaiah that God would withdraw God's sustaining presence because the people turned away from the very thing that sustains—justice, mercy, fruits of the Spirit that feed the Spirit so that Spirit can continue its sustaining work. It's a feedback loop of blessing.

And I know, it can be a very dangerous line of thinking to go down, this thinking that degrades into imagining God as all about just desserts, as all about crime and punishment. “You get what you deserve,” goes this cheap theology, and it enables the conclusion that people amidst bad fortune must have done something to deserve that, which in turn enables inaction: “We shouldn't help such people for it is God's will that they're poor, homeless, enslaved, unwell.”

Noted. It's problematic.

On the other hand, how very reckless it proves to be, this line of thinking that what we have going for us in this country is a given, is nothing for which we are responsible or comes to us

as commandment. Really, maybe is the true risk of secularism—not that a purely secular society removes all fear of a God who punishes, but that a purely secular society forgets the spiritual nature of what we have here, that a purely secular society will have no reverence for what spiritual sustenance we actually rely upon.

Lies can kill this thing with which we've been entrusted. Illusion and deception can snuff out that sustaining spirit of the people's consent. The raw assertion of power, not in service of anything but its own furtherance, can indeed destroy this otherwise mystical sustaining, this ineffable constituting of a country full of citizens committed to pressing on toward ever more perfect union. This can happen. Some seem to think this is happening—has been for the last four years, has been for the last forty years, has been anyway for the last four days.

I found much of this week horrifying. Maybe you did too. Perhaps most horrifying of all to me are the pictures and video that have come out of the Rose Garden gathering to introduce Amy Coney Barrett as the latest Supreme Court nominee. This turns out to have been a super-spreader event with world-order consequences—the Executive Branch, the Judicial Branch, the Legislative Branch, the Justice Department, all brought close to conspire, which is to say to breathe together, which at a time when conspiracy theories pose real danger, none is more dangerous than actual conspiracy, actual breathing together for this is the means by which COVID spreads.

The smug recklessness on display, all those unmasked faces but for their masks of power, is galling to me. This collection of people entrusted with the global political order behaving as if they owed nothing to anyone, as if they were answerable only to their own urge to be close to power, is shameful, criminal. And I am deeply sad for the suffering some of them will undergo: COVID, in some cases, is devastating. I'm deeply sad more so for their households and neighborhoods, which have, without their consent, been drawn into this circle of infection—for now have come these natural consequences, viral spread. Now has come a teetering that might call to mind the question as to whether God's sustaining presence is in withdrawal. It's a dangerous question. But so is the assumption that to suppose such a thing is but some ancient, irrelevant way of seeing things.

America could break.

This society, this democratic constitutional republic: it could break. This mystically held-together, communally agreed upon, popularly consented to thing: it could break. Or it could be

made to hold together by some far darker spirit, as is currently being generated, with every rally, with every utterance, so many recent speech-acts amounting to violence.

The essence of the United States, this country full of converts to our constitution: it could depart, this essence, this sustaining spirit. And then what?

Really. Then what?

It's frightening to imagine. It's utterly sorrowing to imagine.

But here's what I would do: I would forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. I would press on toward the goal, the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus, using what power I have to serve for the sake of abounding love and demanding justice.

Funny, no matter what changes about the times in which we live, the task at hand is ever the same. Sometimes it's easier to do, and sometimes it's harder. Sometimes it comes cheap. Sometimes its costly indeed. But it's always the same. Love. Truth and love. Justice and love.

The Bible is long, speaks to us from much of human history. Nations rise and fall. Empires rise and fall. God's blessing, arriving, quickens one thing while God's blessing, departing, lays to rest something else. This happens. As to whether this is happening right now as regards these United States, I can't say. But I also realize it doesn't matter, not really, not when it comes to the living of *my* day, of *this* day.

Love. Self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

Thanks be to God.