

In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, the Red Queen said to Alice, “Do you know Languages? What’s the French for fiddle-de-dee?”

“Fiddle-de-dee’s not English,” Alice replied gravely.

“Who ever said it was?” said the Red Queen.

Alice thought she saw a way out of the difficulty this time. “If you’ll tell me what language ‘fiddle-de-dee’ is, I’ll tell you the French for it!”¹

When we look at the Bible, we have various ways of trying to understand it and apply it to our lives. Some passages are trickier than others. Unfortunately, some of the ones that appear to be straightforward are sometimes saying something different than we think they are. The Book of Isaiah was composed over a long period. The prophecy covers the reigns of the four kings listed in the opening verse. Then, chapters 40-55 encompass the Babylonian exile. And, the final eleven chapters focus on temple matters.² In each, the book speaks to a current situation in the lives of God’s people. Deciphering the meaning for today can be a bit like Alice’s conversation with the Red Queen. We do not know exactly what it means.

One method of unlocking a text’s meaning is structural criticism. The philosophical anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss first applied this literary technique to reading the Bible.³ This approach suggests that we focus on the text as it stands, not on authors or editors or how Isaiah came to be, over how long, and who really wrote it. The meaning is what it conveys to the readers. In this case, that is us. So, we read the passage and apply it to our lives. The last verse of this reading summarizes the meaning: God wants justice (משפט) but we have bloodshed (משפח). God wants righteousness (צדקה) but we hear cries (צעקה).

Isaiah 5 is poetry, “Let me sing for my beloved.” Like other poetry, there are spaces between the lines that the listener must fill in. As is common in Hebrew poetry, the vineyard represents the beloved. The beloved did everything he could to promote growth. He dug the vineyard, set it up, and prepared it. Anyone who gardens knows that a lot of work precedes planting the first seed. When the harvest came, instead of producing grapes for wine, the vineyard has “wild grapes,” באשם which could also be translated as “poison berries.”

The poem shifts. The prophet turns to the audience (vv. 3-4) and asks them to “judge between me and my vineyard.” Who is guilty? Who failed? The owner (vv. 5-6) assumes that the verdict is against the vineyard and moves to judgment. He will return the land—this land that he carefully cultivated—to waste. What started as a love song has now become a trial. Isaiah speaks for the vineyard owner and argues a case before the Israelite audience.

2 Samuel 12 is a parallel to Isaiah’s speech on behalf of the vineyard owner. Nathan the prophet goes to David the king and tells him a story. The story is about a rich man who stole a poor man’s little lamb. David is outraged against this criminal and pronounces judgment. Nathan says, “You are that man!” David just *took* Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah killed. Now, in Isaiah 5, we see the same indictment against Isaiah’s audience. *You are the guilty ones!* Thank goodness Isaiah is not saying that to us. We can use structural criticism, describe this passage as poetry, and keep it at an arm’s length.

I have struggled with this passage all week. Perhaps that is why I ventured as far as Lewis Carroll and Claude Lévi-Strauss. What is it telling us about justice and righteousness? After another mass shooting, I did not know what to say. I have some experience with events like the one in Las Vegas last Sunday night. My experience is with prayer services. And, I have done too many. I cannot even remember the first one. Maybe it was after the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in Newtown, CT. I definitely remember planning and leading prayer services after the mass shootings in Charleston and Orlando, and then after the Dallas shooting of five law enforcement officers.

People celebrated my ecumenical outreach and organizational ability. But, that is not my calling. My calling is to follow Jesus. Luke 4:18 has Jesus reading Isaiah 61:1, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, anointing me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to give sight to the blind, and to set the oppressed free.” Praying after a disaster is not the only thing God calls any of us to do. Yes, we can pray, but God expects justice (משפט) but we have bloodshed (משפה). God expects righteousness (צדקה) but we hear cries (צעקה). In Isaiah 5, the song of the unfruitful vineyard shows what God wants.

The first rule of biblical interpretation is: do not reverse the miracle at Cana (John 2); do not turn the wine into water. Our interpretation cannot replace the words themselves. Isaiah speaks to a people who have displaced the love for God and one another. God is not the center of their lives and so the vineyard faces judgement. This failure of justice and righteousness is a frequent theme in prophetic writing. Often, when justice fails, the powerful have taken advantage of the weak. Instead of keeping Isaiah at arm’s length we can let this passage speak to us and ask ourselves if we have any role in the failure of justice in our world. Have we heard cries when we should have been righteous?

In the first weeks I was here, we planned a prayer service for peace in anticipation of the white supremacists coming to our city August 12. Putting together prayer services is easy. But, now I struggle continuing to call for prayer services when we just keep killing each other. How can we hear God and live out the kind of justice God wants for our world? This is not politics—this is about God. It is about our relationship to God and how we live it in our world. What about the vineyard of our lives? Are we producing grapes for the wine press?

And, what do we produce? Hatred. Quarrelling. Disbelief. “Nones” are one of the fastest growing categories of religion, not because God has abandoned us, but because we our relationship with God is not transformative. It is transactional. I come to salvation not because I love God, but to avoid my perception of hell. Once I get that blessed assurance, I am ready to cruise through life. Yet, God did not make a deal. God offers a relationship

Maybe we cannot change the world. But, we can change ourselves. When Alice thought of a clever response to the Red Queen in Lewis Carroll’s story, the Queen “drew herself up rather stiffly, and said, ‘Queens never make bargains.’”⁴ Do we find our place in God’s story? We can hear Isaiah and say that we are not trying to make a bargain with God.

We want to make a change in ourselves. We want to produce God's justice and righteousness. We can share God's love and mercy. Maybe it will spread. Loving Lord, let it be so. Amen.

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass: And What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1871), 193. Cited in John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984), 104.

² Niels Peter Lemche, *The Old Testament between Theology and History: A Critical Survey* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 18-20.

³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale Deux* (Paris: Plon, 1958).

⁴ Carroll, 193.