



“Murder in the Vineyard”

Texts: Isaiah 5:1-7 and Mark 12:1-12

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We have before us this morning a murder mystery. The case is a real one. It is two thousand years old and is still an open case. A definitive conclusion has never been reached. The case concerns a murder in a vineyard. The victim’s name is Jesus of Nazareth, also known as “the Christ.” The suspect’s name – or suspects’ names – are not certain. There are a number of “persons of interest,” but an arrest has never been made.

You can’t really call this a “cold case,” because the case has been the subject of consideration, debate, and discussion for centuries. No one has ever put the case file in a drawer and forgotten about it. It is the stuff of papers and lectures and studies, though not in law schools and law enforcement academies. However, it has been known to be part of the curricula at most theological seminaries in the Christian tradition.

What happened, over two thousand years ago, that brought about the death of Jesus? How did it happen? And, most importantly, what does it mean?

We need to make an absolute opening statement. In the gospels, there is always a reference to “the Jews” or “the Jewish leaders.” Such references have fueled the fire of anti-Semitism in the church and beyond for two thousand years. And at this time of year, when we, as Christians, contemplate the death of Jesus Christ, the tendency toward blaming the ancient Jews, and propagating hatred toward their modern-day descendants is all too common.

Let us begin this sermon with this unequivocal and indisputable truth: there is no room for any form of anti-Semitism within the Christian tradition. Anyone who claims to be a Christian and harbors, professes, or acts out of hate toward the Jews is a liar, a fake, and a complete fraud. Anti-Semitism, in any of its expressions or forms, is anathema to Christianity.

The case file for the “murder in the vineyard,” is a bit out of the ordinary. Its pages contain two stories – two allegories – one from the prophet Isaiah and one from Jesus Christ. Both allegories concern a vineyard, its owner, and its tenants. Each informs the other. Both take us to the heart of the matter: the murder of Jesus Christ.

Isaiah tells us:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

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...

Jesus tells us:

A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the
wine press, and built a watchtower; then he leased it to tenants
and went to another country...

In Isaiah’s telling of the story, the vineyard is a failure. Instead of sweet and useful grapes, the vineyard yields wild and useless grapes. In Jesus’ story, the vineyard is a huge success, yielding a bountiful harvest of good grapes. The results differ, but the scene of the crime is the same.

There is general agreement that in these two allegorical tellings, the vineyards refer to God’s people, God’s creation, and God’s property. The one who plants the gardens and owns the vineyards is God. In the vineyard of Isaiah’s report, the failure of the grapes to produce good fruit is representative of the failure of God’s people to live according to the principles of justice and righteousness. The vineyard is abandoned and forsaken and the people who were God’s pleasant planting are taken off to exile in Babylon.

In Jesus’ story, the owner sends an emissary to those who are tending the vineyard in the owner’s absence. The first emissary – a slave – is beaten and sent away empty-handed. The second emissary was beaten over the head and insulted and sent away with nothing. The third emissary was killed. Finally, the owner of the vineyard sent his own son to collect the profits of the vineyard. The owner thought that his own son would be received and his authority would be respected. But, when the owner’s son came to the vineyard, the unworthy tenants said, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.” So, we are told, they seized the owner’s son, killed him, and threw his lifeless body out of the vineyard.

That is the case file. Those are the stories that have been told and passed down through the ages. We’ve heard them countless times. But, what conclusions can we draw?

As in every homicide case, the question comes down to motive. Why was the victim killed? In our specific case, the question narrows to, "Why was Jesus of Nazareth murdered?"

Make no mistake. Jesus' death was a murder. It was violent and gruesome. It was a heinous crime. Crucifixion led to a grisly death by suffocation and exposure, according to the forensic reports.

And Jesus' death was unjust. We Presbyterians say it in our "Brief Statement of Faith:"

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.

In the Confession of 1967, with words we will use again later this morning, we read:

His crucifixion discloses to the church God's judgment
on our inhumanity to each other and the awful consequences
of our own complicity in injustice.

An innocent man was murdered by those religious and political authorities who colluded to bring about his death. According to other reputable accounts in the gospels, the common people of the day were co-conspirators in crying out for Jesus' unjust gang-land execution.

But, why? Why did they want Jesus gone so badly?

It is a question of authority – of who will be in charge. It is a question of power – who will have it and who won't. You hear it in the rationale of the unjust tenants of Jesus' story: "...the inheritance will be ours." We will take from God and take from God and take from God, until all that was God's is ours. We will use it and abuse it as we please. We will have things the way we want them, without respect to God's intent in giving them to us. We will do as we please without regard to things like justice and righteousness.

We do not want God's help. We will do as we please. We will take from the resources of creation and all that they bring.

We do not want God's way of life. We will live as we please and do as we please. We will satisfy ourselves and reap such harvests of joy and contentment as may delight us, even when it means taking from the poor and justifying injustice.

We do not want to be reminded of God's way and expectations. We want to live as we want to live. We don't want God's involvement or direction.

We do not want to be responsible to God or anyone else. We want what we want when we want it. We will take what we want. We will gather power unto ourselves. We will suck up to those who seem to be in charge. We will actively reject God's message and we will have no aversion to killing whatever messenger God sends. And we will have no problem killing anyone who stands in our way – even the Son of God.

"...And the inheritance will be ours." And we will be in charge here.

And lest we look down on those people of Jesus' day and wonder how they could be so thoughtless, insensitive, and unjust, let us remember that we are part of that story. We are people who in our own day and in our own way say, "...and the inheritance will be ours." We abandon God's way, we ignore God's message, we resist God's guidance, and we defy God's presence and calling. And each time we do, we drive another nail into that nail-ridden cross.

Ever since I was a child, raised in a go-to-church-every-Sunday family, I have wondered about why there is a cross in the center of our worship space. When I went to my grandparents' church, there was a crucifix. Jesus was being perpetually crucified. My Presbyterian upbringing told me that wasn't quite right. But there was still a cross in our church.

It's only taken me sixty years to figure it out, so let me save you a little time. Maybe the cross is at the center of our worship, because it tells us something about God and our relationship with God. Maybe the cross is there to remind us that, in spite of our deepest longings, God is in charge here. Maybe the cross is there to remind us that violence is not the way to live as people created in God's image. Maybe it is there as an uncomfortable reminder of our tendency toward brutality and bloodshed. Maybe the cross is there to remind us of how easy it is to slip into unjust behavior and practice. Maybe it is there to make us just uncomfortable enough that we abandon wrong-doing and ego-centered living. Maybe the cross is there to remind us of our tendency to hubris. Maybe, in the cross, we can see our propensity to excessive pride, arrogance, and ambition.

Maybe the cross is ever before us, reminding us of how pitiable and pompous we can truly be. Maybe the cross is there to remind us how easily misguided and irresponsible we can truly be.

But, and here is the good news: the cross is empty. The cross is not the end of the story. And like any good murder mystery, it's a cliff-hanger. You'll have to come back next week for the rest of the story.

And let me assure you: the rest of the story is incredible. Just wait, you'll see.

There is good news and it's coming our way. And you'll want to hear it.

For now and evermore. Amen.



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