

“Love song”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*by Rev. Patrick David Heery*

When I hear these two passages, one from the prophet Isaiah, the other from the Book of Psalms, intertwined like so, I think of an old married couple sitting in dueling recliners, arguing the same arguments they’ve been arguing for decades. And if you didn’t know this couple, if you’ve just met them, you’d think this marriage is broken; you’d think they don’t love each other. But were you to linger, you’d notice the gentle touch of hands, grown paper thin, and laughter long before old jokes reach their punchline, and the quiet of an afternoon nap, each with a book on their lap, and hidden tears at the thought of losing this person.

They don’t argue because they hate each other. They argue because they need each other.

And wow, do we have a doozy of an argument between God and humanity. In our reading from Isaiah, God’s angry because God has given everything to the Israelites, has done everything possible to see that this vineyard (a metaphor for Israel) grows and flourishes, but in the end, somehow it still wasn’t enough. Israel has become an unjust, cruel place, where the 1 percent control 90 percent of the wealth and land. They follow other, more convenient gods.

This isn’t how it was supposed to be. These are supposed to be the promised people, the children of the light, the ones who show the world that justice and love are stronger than greed and hate. These are the ones who are supposed to care for the widow and the orphan, for the weak and the oppressed, because they too were once slaves, because it was the God of an orphan, Moses, who freed them.

Instead, they have become like every other people on this earth: greedy and small-minded.

So God vows to rip up the vineyard. We know how the rest of the story goes: Babylon destroys Israel, destroys Judah, sending the remnants into exile—the first diaspora of the Jewish people.

But of course there are always two sides to an argument. And it’s that other side we hear in Psalm 80. In the wake of that destruction, the people of Israel cry out in pain. They have sat by the river and wept, with no home to call their own, abused daily by their overlords, the promises of God turned to ash.

This isn’t how it was supposed to be. God was supposed to watch over them like a shepherd, to protect them from the wolves. God was supposed to be like a father to them, like a mother, to love them no matter what, not abandon them. God was supposed to be better than this, more loving than this.

Like that old married couple, God and humanity have been having this argument for a very long time. God cries out in pain, hearing the weeping of the people we've abandoned, the worship we've neglected, the earth we've destroyed. And in turn, we cry out in anger, for all the good things we were promised and did not receive, for the ravages of old age, for miscarriages and the death of a spouse, for layoffs and empty bellies, for children shot by police and police shot by children, for crumbling churches and the success of evil men. We lodge our accusations, God and humanity each in their turn.

I must say this has got to be the worst love song I have ever heard. I mean, that's how this all starts, right? The prophet Isaiah says that he's going to sing a love song.

And yeah, I guess it's a love song in the same way that Adele's breakup songs are love songs.

First, God's all like... [play "Rolling in the Deep" till 1:18)

*There's a fire starting in my heart  
Reaching a fever pitch, it's bringing me out the dark  
Finally I can see you crystal clear  
[Clean version:] Go 'head and sell me out and I'll lay your ship bare  
See how I leave with every piece of you  
Don't underestimate the things that I will do*

*There's a fire starting in my heart  
Reaching a fever pitch  
And it's bringing me out the dark*

*The scars of your love remind me of us  
They keep me thinking that we almost had it all  
The scars of your love, they leave me breathless  
I can't help feeling  
We could have had it all  
(You're gonna wish you never had met me)  
Rolling in the deep  
(Tears are gonna fall, rolling in the deep)  
You had my heart inside of your hand  
(You're gonna wish you never had met me)  
And you played it, to the beat  
(Tears are gonna fall, rolling in the deep)*

Then, humanity's like... [play "Don't you remember" till 1:34)

*When will I see you again?  
You left with no goodbye, not a single word was said*

*No final kiss to seal anything  
And I had no idea of the state we were in*

*I know I have a fickle heart and a bitterness  
And a wandering eye, and a heaviness in my head  
But don't you remember, don't you remember?  
The reason you loved me before  
Baby please remember me once more*

And when that didn't work, humanity's says... [play "Hello" till 1:57]

*Hello, it's me  
I was wondering if after all these years you'd like to meet  
To go over everything  
They say that time's supposed to heal ya  
But I ain't done much healing...*

*Hello, can you hear me  
I'm in California dreaming about who we used to be  
When we were younger and free  
I've forgotten how it felt before the world fell at our feet*

*There's such a difference between us  
And a million miles*

*Hello from the other side  
I must have called a thousand times  
To tell you I'm sorry for everything that I've done  
But when I call you never seem to be home*

*Hello from the outside  
At least I can say that I've tried  
To tell you I'm sorry for breaking your heart  
But it don't matter it clearly doesn't tear you apart anymore*

But, you know, here's the thing, while this may not be the happy love song we wanted, I think it's the love song we needed. It's honest about pain and anger and heartbreak. But even more than that, it's proof. It's proof that God hasn't given up on us—and that we in turn haven't given up on God.

Because you don't argue with someone, you don't talk about disappointment, unless you still care for that person. And you don't get angry unless you still believe in the promise, still believe that it can and should be better than this.

Don't you see? These tearful songs are battle cries. In them, God and humanity are fighting to hold onto each other. They are the sound of hope.

It's totally backwards, I know. Of course, it would be better not to have disagreements and mistakes and hurts to argue about. But we don't live in a perfect world. And that's why those who study relationships say that arguments can be healthy.

"At least they're trying to reach the other person," marriage counselor Bernie Slutsky says. Because not fighting is a sign of withdrawal.

This song is a lifeline between us and God, and as long as it's there, even as God and humanity shout at each other, this marriage will survive.

The Book of Isaiah is full of condemnations like the one we read today, but always, Isaiah talks about how God will restore Israel, how God's anger will wane in the face of God's undying love.

And it's that love that I witnessed three weeks ago, when one of our own, a brilliant young woman, Chloe Calhoun, died in a car crash, killed by a drunk driver as she exited an ice cream parlor. She was 18 years old. She had just graduated high school and was set to start college this fall. I know that angry words were shouted at God that night. I know that I was not the only one crying, "Why, O God, would you allow this to happen? Where were you when Chloe needed you?" But I also know that those weren't the only shouts that night. Because I could hear God beating God's chest, weeping and wailing with us, God's tears filling that mangled car. God screamed that night as God watched her baby girl be killed in a senseless, preventable act of violence.

Jenna and I went to the candlelight vigil the night after Chloe's death. Hundreds were there. And let me tell you this: it was not silent that night. People cried. People told stories. They laughed at memories. They comforted one another. And lights filled the sky. They lit dozens of lanterns and set them to rise and rise and rise, until the night was banished. Those lights, combined with the cacophony of tears and words, told me that this community hasn't given up.

It told me that God is wounded in love. We are wounded in love. But there is hope for this marriage yet: because we're still talking. And it reminded me of another time when our love was tested—of a time when death and empire and sin thought they had at last ended this marriage and silenced God, as God hung on that cross, dead. But they were wrong. Jesus Christ was resurrected. And then we knew it: not even death can end this love song. The song may rage, may despair, but it goes on, like those lanterns in the sky for Chloe, singing back and forth, beloved to beloved, until we are together again, and all is mended.

Now *that's* a love song! **Amen.**