

Sermon for July 11, 2021 at Zion

Holy God, I ask you to set an angel on my shoulder with her hand over my mouth, that my words will be filtered and ordered by your love. Amen.

Grace and peace to you, from God, our source of life, and from Jesus, our Lord. Amen

What a horrid tale we have to consider today! It's hard to find any love in this gospel story, unless it is the care with which John's disciples retrieve his body, to bury it respectfully. The reading from Amos is difficult, too.

I want us to look at Amos first.

For some time, the Old Testament prophets were viewed as holy people who could foretell the future. Gradually, that supernatural sort of knowledge became less prevalent and the prophets' delivery of divine messages became primary. We read of "the Word of the Lord" coming to individuals who were then called to deliver those messages to kings, priests, or the whole people of Israel and Judah. The messages frequently announced what we might call a "come to Jesus" moment: "Here's where you messed up," the prophet might say, "so let me tell you what your actions have set in motion. You are not going to like it."

Sometimes the messages continued, "However, if you do this, it might change God's mind, and then God might cancel the consequences." Think of Jonah, who was totally frustrated and discouraged that people *did* heed his warnings and none of the coming calamities came true. The people changed their ways, and God apparently changed God's mind.

Prophets have never been popular folks. Nobody, I suspect, enjoys being called out on their mistakes and bad decisions.

Amos was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. He said Jehovah had taken him from following his flock to become a messenger. His era, thought to be 750 to 760 years before Jesus, was a time of prosperity for the nation because no outsiders had invaded to mess things up. The leaders lived in luxury and accumulated wealth in ways that led to injustice and oppression of the poor. Amos saw the religion of Jehovah dis-honored, debased.

Amos insisted that social justice was essential, and that God would judge harshly those who kept others down as a means for their own gain. In today's first reading, the Lord tells Amos, "I am

setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” Amos seems to be saying that God has run out of patience. In the Exodus story, the angel of death passed over the Israelites in Egypt and no Hebrew firstborn were killed. Here, Amos claims that God has had enough, and holds the people accountable for not measuring up against God’s true standard, God’s plumb line.

Meanwhile the priest Amaziah, an insider in the socio-economic system and friend of King Jeroboam II, benefits from the status quo. Amaziah has grown accustomed to the life of luxury. He has a vested interest in keeping things as they are. Of course he doesn’t want to hear Amos’ message.

Commentator Elaine James wrote, and I quote:

“This material prosperity seems to have come at the expense of the poor, and points to a growing gap between the rural poor and wealthier landowners: Amos 2:7 reads, ‘they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.’ Economic injustice — structural and systemic injustice that perpetuates social inequality — is his central concern.”

End quote.

When we read the book of Amos, it’s easy to think it’s all about God’s anger. But for Amos, God’s anger is not separate from God’s love.

For Amos, God’s wrath is against injustice, because injustice causes suffering. This is why God deeply cares about oppression. God’s judgment against those who oppress others *is* evidence of God’s love. For Amos, this is what happens in a living relationship with a God who cares passionately. Israel has failed to live up to its covenant with God.

So Amos tells Amaziah, the priest of the Northern Kingdom, the message from God. Amaziah is outraged. -- I don’t want to hear it! Go do your thing somewhere else! --

I would like to think we are more like Amos than Amaziah. But we, too, are committed to causes we believe in. We don’t want to see them fall apart -- even if they are harmful to some people.

Amos despised religious piety that ignored injustice. He said religion without justice was meaningless. “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Now back to our gospel reading.

John the Baptist calls out King Herod Antipas on his illegal and unethical marriage. He says it was wrong that Herod took his brother's wife, Herodias. She would rather have John killed than face his accusation, so King Herod may have put John into prison to protect him from his wife's revenge. In verse 20 of today's reading, Mark says Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.

When Herod and his guests are so pleased with the daughter's -- or step-daughter's -- dance entertainment at his birthday party, he is eager to reward her with anything she wants. Here was the golden opportunity for Herodias, and she instructed the girl to ask for John's head. It is interesting to note that while Matthew's account tells us Herod wanted John killed, our reading from Mark says Herod was "deeply grieved." The Greek word used here was used only one other time in Mark's gospel, and that was to describe Jesus' feelings in the garden of Gethsemane. Deeply grieved.

But King Herod had given his word to the girl, and oaths were not easily let go among the Jews. If Herod backed out on his promise of giving the girl whatever she asked, he would lose face -- and credibility -- with his esteemed guests. Ultimately, he chose to protect his own reputation (and his marriage, perhaps?) and grant the girl's wish -- Herodias' wish.

Incidentally, in the culture of that century, dying in battle at the hands of an enemy was honorable, but for a man to die at the hands of a woman was a mark of shame. John's death was a disgrace in more than one way.

What can we make of this story, besides using it as an example of what *not* to do?

We can say we're not anything like Herod. We would never commit murder to save our reputations.

On another level, however, there are related questions we could ask ourselves. Debie Thomas, who writes a weekly webzine called "Journey with Jesus," offers these thoughts, and I quote:

"No, I don't go around killing people. But do I care too much about what other people think of me? Do I value my status, reputation, and popularity more than I do the truth?

** Am I so bent on conflict-avoidance that I harm others with my passivity? (ouch)

Do I prefer stability and safety more than transformation?

"These are personal questions on the one hand, but very public ones on the other. When I choose silence for the sake of convenience, whose life becomes expendable? When I decide

that justice is too messy, chaotic, or costly for me to pursue, who suffers in the long term? Whose vulnerability do I depend on and benefit from to keep my own comforts intact?"

End quote.

I wonder what Amos or John the Baptist would say to us when we face people who don't look or sound like us, maybe immigrants, LGBTQIA++ folks, or people with visible disabilities. Maybe we would be called out on our fearful silence when speaking out would be the the better choice.

Elaine James asks difficult questions:

"When does our lack of love and justice render our own piety meaningless? How do the institutions that benefit us build dams against the deep rivers of justice? When does our well-meaning comfort mask indifference?"

When Amos reported his vision of God judging Israel for its mistreatment of the poor, he became a threat to the power of the priests and the king. John the Baptist also spoke truth to power, and Herod had him killed. We are called to witness to justice in company with them, and to proclaim God's saving love.

We need to remember that God's saving love also saves us from fear, self-righteous beliefs, and apathy. God's Big Love is still at work in us, *giving* us the spirit of love, the spirit of compassion, that our neighbors and we, ourselves, so greatly need.

Thanks be to God.