

July 14, 2024

Pr. Lucy

Texts: Amos 7: 7-15; Ephesians 1: 3-14; Mark 6: 14-29

Do you remember the prayer we prayed at the beginning of worship? In it we asked to be given that *'peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments, and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may live in peace and quietness.'*

In today's readings, Amos and John the Baptizer provide powerful examples of persons who obeyed God's commandments and called others to do the same, but whose lives were filled with anything but peace and quietness.

Amos, a simple farmer called to be God's prophet, lived in Judah, the southern kingdom, but God gave him a message for Israel, the northern kingdom, and for its king, Jeroboam. At the time, things were very peaceful politically in Israel, in the northern kingdom, and there was great prosperity, but that prosperity was enjoyed by only a few who made their wealth by cheating the poor. Sound familiar?

God sent Amos to prophesy to the north using the image of a plumbline—(you see an example [of a plumbline] on the front of the Bulletin)—a tool used by builders to ensure that walls are true, [i.e.] they're completely straight and vertical. Amos said God was measuring Israel's actions against the plumbline of God's vision for God's people—to be a people made for justice and formed for faithfulness. But by that measure, God had found them wanting, warped, out of alignment. And Amos declared that because Israel had turned faith into pride, the wall of protection they relied on was crumbling, and now they were facing death, destruction, and exile—unless they repented.

In today's story we never hear what King Jeroboam thought of this prophecy. We only hear what Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, thought of it—which was that it was treasonous, an affront to the King, and something to be utterly rejected. It's interesting—Amaziah doesn't ever talk about God, only about the King. And when he talks about the sanctuary of the temple at Bethel, he speaks of it as the King's sanctuary, when in fact it was meant to be functioning as a shrine of God.

Amaziah talks politics, while Amos talks holiness. Amaziah issues a deportation order to Amos warning him to flee to Judah if he values his life. He also accuses Amos of being a prophet for profit (P-R-O-F-I-T), when, actually, it was Amaziah who earned his keep (and a very good one at that) by saying only what the King

wanted to hear. To all this, Amos said simply, *'I was quite content to be an ordinary farmer, but then God called me. God sent me, and I obeyed.'* [Amos 7: 15] I answer to God, not to anyone else, not to you, Amaziah, or to the King' (which was cheeky, but true.) So, at the end of today's text, we find Amos keeping on keeping on—even if it meant not enjoying peace and quietness—even when it meant being rejected, threatened, labeled a traitor and a security risk.

And then, we come to Mark, who sandwiches a flashback about the imprisonment and death of John the Baptizer between the story of Jesus sending out the disciples to expand the mission, and the story of the disciples returning to report to Jesus about their mission. The flashback helps explain why Herod believed John had come back from the dead when reports came to him about what Jesus was saying and doing, telling us what happened to the one who announced Jesus and his mission, when his [John's] preaching collided with Herod's self-interest, how John earned death—not peace and quietness—for his faithfulness and speaking the truth.

With this flashback story, Mark also prepares us for what Jesus will face—his own arrest, imprisonment, and death, because, even more than John, what Jesus says and does threatens the way things are, and the powers that be, and makes clear that God's reign of mercy and justice is here to stay. It also sends the message that anyone who follows Jesus, whether the Twelve, or you, or I, must expect consequences—if not death—and resistance, and rejection.

In fact, Jesus will spell out the consequences when he and the Twelve head to Jerusalem later in the gospel, saying *'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel will save it.'* [Mark 8: 35] So, in a way, you could say that today's texts are a repeat, or a reinforcement, of last week's message gleaned from the experience of another prophet, Ezekiel, and Jesus' experience going home to Nazareth.

But there's something else here, and it comes in a part of the flashback story about John and Herod that doesn't usually get talked about. It's Mark's comment about how John perplexed Herod. Mark writes, *'Herod feared John knowing that he was a good and holy man, and he protected him. When Herod heard John, he was greatly perplexed, and yet, he liked to listen to him.'* [Mark 6: 20] Most of the time when we hear or read this story, we get caught up in the foolish oath that Herod made, promising a young woman whatever she wanted, or in the gory consequences of keeping his oath.

But I wonder whether as disciples of Jesus in this time and place, we, too, find Jesus not just holy and good, but perplexing. We want to keep him around, because what he says impresses us as holy and good, or even as refreshingly new, and different, and hopeful. But, like Herod, we also like our self-interest, our desire to preserve things as they are, to not have to accept the challenge discipleship brings—to speak the truth, to ask uncomfortable questions, to announce what God's plumbline reveals—even if we also get to say that God is willing to create something new and true in us—to make us a New Creation.

Frankly, we're often just not very fond of resistance. We don't feel up to it—even though Jesus already has met the full resistance of sin and death, and overcome it, winning for us a new future that's unfolding, even now.

So perhaps then, friends, today, and especially today is the day to admit that as much as we love Jesus, he perplexes us. He complicates our life. My Jesus isn't so much the answer, as the question and the questioner, of what we and the world around us are used to living. And that sometimes, frankly, we'd like him to go back to his room, to get out of our hair, to quit making waves so we could have some peace and quiet, and not have to think about answering his call—which means having to live against the grain of the world.

But then again, going back to the prayer that began our worship, what we're promised is not just any peace, but that peace which the world cannot give—a peace that can keep us aligned with God's plumbline, with God's purposes, steady and true, even when we're tempted to take the easy way out.

Soon a delegation from Peace will be going to be with our friends in Lwamondo Parish in South Africa. And today those who are Prayer Partners with our sisters in Laurel Galan, Nicaragua (and are here this morning) will be taking a picture to send to them as a visible sign of our solidarity and our friendship.

Folks, these relationships, and the conversations they enable, and the contrast they present us with, are not just interesting, pleasant, and beautiful. They are ways that in person, or by letter, or by prayer, we talk with one another about the ways life in our countries, and in our churches, are or are not living according to God's plumbline, and challenging us to ask, '*What is God calling us to do about it?*' Our friends deserve to know that we, too, are willing to accept God's challenge to tell the truth, and to do the truth, of living in the solidarity of the gospel, and challenging our government leaders, our church leaders, as well as one another—to follow our holy, good, but always perplexing Savior. And dare to tell the truth

and live lives devoted to love and peace-making—difficult as it may be—even when we're resisted, or ignored, or worse.

Can we commit to being a holy and perplexing community for the sake of the Gospel? And can we commit to sharing with one another here, and with our partners in South Africa and Nicaragua, the stories of what we are confronting, and what we're daring, stories of how we were perplexed, but how the grace of God powered us through?

What do you say? Can we do that?

Then in the meantime, this morning, let us all recommit ourselves to the call we have by Baptism, and eat and drink the Meal by which God promises to give us the courage, and the strength to be faithful, bold, and true—and blessedly perplexing—in all the days ahead.

God grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.