

Mark 6:14-29 7.11.24 Bill Uetrict Pentecost 8

One of the things that should not be said about the church, especially a church like ours that uses the lectionary, assigned Biblical readings that appear every three years, is that we hide you from the tough stuff of life and the Bible. Sometimes I wish we would. It would make the preacher's job easier. But the lectionary will not let us be easy—easy on preachers, easy on listeners, easy on politicians, easy on our society.

Truthfully, sometimes I wished that we would do preaching in a different way. I wished that our spaces would be designed differently so that we could engage you in some conversation with one another, so that the messenger (the preacher) is not the only one who has to relay the tough stuff. You could discover it together.

Amos, one of the harshest prophets in the Bible, brings us tough stuff in our first reading for today. He's a guy from the south who is addressing people in the north. This is always a recipe for disaster. Few of us like it when some outsider offers critique of us. Americans don't hear critique well when it comes from, I don't know, the Canadians, the French, the Swedes. They ain't got no right talking to us. Well, Amos the southerner is talking to the northerners. And he is telling them that they aren't living straight lives. He says that what God has shown him is a wall built with a plumb line. And the plumb line is in the midst of his people, Israel. The plumb line is going to help him see where his people are, and he now is going to avoid them. He will never pass them by again.

Whoo! God is ticked off, so ticked off that he is going to make sure that the high places of Israel, the sanctuaries, are laid to waste. And what's more, he is coming after the king of Israel with a sword.

We aren't hiding the tough stuff from you today. Amos is not hiding the tough stuff from the leadership of Israel, the northern

kingdom. And this leadership is deeply threatened. The high priest at the sanctuary at Bethel, a guy named Amaziah, tells on Amos. He sends a note to the king saying, “Amos is conspiring against you in the very center of the house of Israel. He is working to undo your kingship at the place where you go to church. He is saying that you are going to die and that Israel is going to go into exile.”

So Amaziah speaks to Amos, “Get the heck out of town. Take your words back to the south. Earn your money there. Leave us alone. You are in the king’s sanctuary. This church belongs to the government.” Whoa! Really? This isn’t a sanctuary for Yahweh. It’s the *king’s* sanctuary.

Ooh, this happens throughout history. People in powerful positions use religion to prop up their power. Religion becomes a tool of the powerful, resulting in powerful people seeking their own prophets who will speak words that represent what they themselves want to hear. Court prophets, they were often called in Biblical times. Amos wasn’t going to be a court prophet. In fact, when Amaziah tells Amos to get out of town Amos responds by saying that he is no prophet. He’s not a court prophet. Actually, maybe he’s no prophet at all. He’s just an ordinary guy, a trimmer of sycamore trees and a shepherd of the sheep. And the only reason that he is speaking the hard words that he is speaking is because God is making him do it.

Many people get nervous when religion and politics are mixed. And frankly, I do, too, when that mixing involves partisan politics, when religion and political parties become joined at the hips. Religion is co-opted then by politics. God is seen as being on my side, supporting my agenda. Amos wouldn’t have any of that. Religion and politics are not separate things for him. But the God he represents is bigger than any agenda, any party. And the message

that he is called to proclaim he speaks reluctantly, for it is truth spoken to power. The powerful won't want to hear the words. But the prophet must speak them because the heart of God longs for justice and truth. And sometimes what the powerful are up to is not justice and truth.

This is where, if I could have my way, I would get you in small groups and have you talk about this. In what ways is the church called to speak truth to power, to address the issues of political importance? In what ways is this a difficult task? And how do you know whether you are speaking God's truth to power, or just telling everybody your opinion. After all, as Richard Rohr says, opinion is the lowest level of knowledge.

And then I would like to ask, how many of us want to hear the hard word? Do you want people to speak the prophetic truth to you, whether you are in a position of power or not? Or do you just want folks who will tell you what you want to hear? Do you allow yourself to have friends or spouses who speak the hard word to you, who call you to a higher place?

Amos is not content with the easy word. A church shaped by the prophets like Amos, and frankly, like John the Baptist, will not let those in power and honestly, you and me, off the hook easily. This John the Baptist story is a wild story, the kind that you probably don't want new people at the church to experience on their first day with you.

In the ELCA's Facebook pastor's page this past week I noted a pastor who said that the story out of Mark about John is so gruesome that he wanted to protect kids from having to hear it. Maybe we just shouldn't read it. I know I am always picking on Joel Osteen, but I really can't see happy Joel preaching on the beheading

of John the Baptist. Try to pick hymns or praise songs about the beheading of John. Google that. Not a wide selection.

The church won't let us not go to the hard places. And again, this is a hard place that comes when truth is spoken to power. John spoke truth to power. To the *tetrarch* Herod—Mark got it wrong in calling him a king—John speaks a word of critique. It's hard to say what the critique is about, but it has something to do with the affair that Herod Antipas had with his sister-in-law. John is criticizing the power-mongering behavior of the man in charge. We often see affairs as sexual improprieties, and they can be. But they often also are great misuses of power by the powerful.

Well, John's critique of Herod got him in trouble with Herodias, the one Herod had an affair with and eventually married. (Isn't it interesting how the powerful in these stories are often depicted? Even their wives are named after them!) Herodias has a prejudice against John. And when another Herodias—somebody's daughter--performs "a dance" (I'll let you fill in the blanks there!), a drunk Herod is very pleased. This is creepy. And the very drunk Herod tells the dancing Herodias that she can have whatever she wants from him now. She then runs off to Mamma Herodias to receive her advice as to what she should ask for. And what does she want? John the Baptist's head on a platter. Violence is what we get too often from people who will do all that they can to maintain power. It's a sad indictment on the human condition, especially that condition which is preoccupied with power.

Now I must ask, where is the good news in all of this? This text comes amid the story of Jesus sending his disciples out into their mission. Is this what the disciples have to look forward to? Beheading? As a Lutheran preacher, I am called to proclaim good news. There doesn't seem to be much good news here. Maybe in a

small group you could figure the good news out. It seems to be evading me.

I am not going to answer the question too quickly or too resolutely because sometimes I think we must sit a while with the hard stuff. Sometimes the good news doesn't make a lot of sense until we see what we are up against, until the truth is told. And sometimes the truth, even the truth that we must hear addressed to ourselves, isn't pretty. Sometimes power is badly misused. That will be the truth as it is applied to the life of Jesus. Note in Mark's story these words: "When John's disciples heard about what happened to John, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb." Didn't something similar occur with Jesus? But in Mark's story, his closest disciples didn't take his body. They all abandoned him. In some ways, what happened to Jesus was worse than what happened to John.

Sometimes we simply have to face the bad stuff. We can't run from it. And I am not going to impose any kind of good news on all of this, although I will say that it's worth your while to come back next week. You can't get another aspect of the message next week. Next week we'll get a different kind of party than the one thrown by Herod. Next week the focus won't be on the powerful and their misdeeds. Next week we'll see that there is an alternative to violence. Next week we'll get a big party for ordinary people, 5000 of them. Next week the rich won't be feeding off the poor. Next week everyone will get fed, and there will be leftovers for people not yet at the party. Next week abundance is going to rule. Next week it will be about the reign, not of Herod and his power-preoccupied people, but of the God discovered in Jesus.

But until next week, I will let you sit with Amos and John the Baptist. Sometimes life isn't easy. And neither is the Bible.