

July 14, 2024  
Proper 10 Year B  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Amos 7:7-15*

*Psalms 85:8-13*

*Ephesians 1:3-14*

*Mark 6:14-29*

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning, we hear stories about prophets, and kings, and kingdoms. Our prophets today are Amos, a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and John the baptizer, fond of camel's hair clothing, and eating wild honey and locusts.

The king in Amos' account is Jeroboam, the first ruler of the newly separated northern kingdom of Israel. In order to prevent pilgrims from returning to the Temple in Jerusalem, Jeroboam built two state temples, each complete with a golden calf (at Shechem and Dan). The king in John's time was Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, and one of the Jewish client kings of the Roman Empire.

Let's begin with Amos. From a small town in the southern kingdom of Judah, Amos travels north to Bethel, where he has a lot to say about what Israel (the northern kingdom) was getting wrong.

Our passage today starts with a vision of God holding a plumb line, a weight at the end of a string that allows masons to see if the walls they are building are straight.<sup>1</sup> In Amos' vision, God has set this plumb line against the kingdom of Israel, and Amos declares that God's judgement will include both the death of the king and the exile of the people.

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sends word to the king about this dire prophecy, and then tells Amos to get out of town. "Never again prophesy at Bethel," he says, "for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

Wait a minute. "The king's sanctuary?" Which king? "A temple of the kingdom?" Whose kingdom? Let's also recall that Bethel means, literally, "house of God."

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to Amos 7:7-8, the image of plumb line appears also in 2 Kings 21:13, Isaiah 28:17, Isaiah 34:11 and Zechariah 4:10.

Let's now turn our attention to this very odd story in Mark's gospel. For Mark, usually the soul of brevity, these sixteen verses are almost a novel. And the level of grisly detail makes it seem like an episode of *Survivor: The Silver Platter Edition*.

First, some reminders about John. John's life as a prophet was about challenging his listeners –the curious, the skeptical or the hostile – to repent. To be willing to change. He confronts the powerful, he shames hypocrites, he rejects polite conventions, all the while generally making a spectacle of himself.

This is the very opposite of Dale Carnegie's popular 1936 self-help book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* – with its interesting subtitle, *The Only Book that You Need to Lead You to Success*. That's a very 20<sup>th</sup> century American sort of plumb line, isn't it?

But winning and influencing were not John's call. Pointing out God's plumb line was...and Herod's incestuous marriage with Herodias was out of plumb. And *on account of Herodias*, Herod imprisons John.

Mark enables us to see Herod not simply as an agent of evil but as a weak human being who has given way to temptation. One of the most interesting features of Mark's profile of Herod comes when the writer pauses to make note of the ruler's emotional state, even before the foolish agreement that leads to John's beheading. *Herod feared John*, he writes, *knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.*

Herod was really stuck. Mark tells us that, even after agreeing to fulfill his oath, Herod was "deeply grieved" *perilupos*, (per-ee'-loo-pos) (Mark 6:20). Mark uses this word, *perilupos*, only twice: first in this story, and then to describe Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:34).

This complicates our typical understanding of Herod, allowing us to see his evil as more cowardly than vicious. Herod places his standing among his peers ahead of his sense of justice. Still, cowardice is a fatal flaw. We can dress it up with names that make it sound acceptable: appeasement, expediency, compromise, consistency, cutting losses. But acting out of fear is always harmful.

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Is there a villain in this horrific episode? I think the villain here isn't Herod, nor the hate-filled Herodias, nor even her dancing daughter. I think the villain here is expediency; and the beheading of John the Baptizer is the forerunner of the greater, more expedient, travesty that will play out in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus some months later. In John's gospel (11:50), we are reminded that the world thinks it better that one should die for the many.

But wait, you say, the bad guy has to be Herod. He comes from a bad family; he does bad things; he collaborates with the Roman occupiers. I say he's confused; you say he's weak. Stay with me a moment...because I want to suggest that we villainize Herod, in large part, to avoid seeing how like him we are.

You and I often keep holy things hidden away in the basements, attics, and closets of our lives. We know that those holy things are important. We are afraid to throw them out. At the same time, we are not really sure what to do with them. So, we live our lives without paying too much attention to the holy, to the call and claim of God on our lives, to the plumb line, because we are afraid that taking this stuff seriously might challenge us to be different. To change.

We tell ourselves that we have to *go along to get along...that's the way the world works!* And truth be told, most of us are happy enough with the way we are, and don't much want to change. I have a friend whose definition of the gospel is this: "God loves you just the way you are. And God loves you too much to let you stay that way."

Which brings us, I think, to the very heart of the gospel promise. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus came to make possible for us more than mere survival, more than mere persistence, more even than mere success. Jesus came to help us imagine that there is more to this life than we can perceive. Jesus came to offer us not simply more life, but abundant life. Jesus came so that there could be a better ending to our story, and the story of the world, than we could imagine or construct on our own.

But the unthinkable does happen. It's called life. So, when the Temple has been destroyed, or your marriage is ending, or you've lost your job, or you've received a dreaded diagnosis, or you fear your child will never speak to you again, or you're pretty sure your best friend has betrayed you, or you think you may just have screwed up the one relationship that meant something to you, or you made a stupid promise that you know you shouldn't keep... When these things happen, then the possibility of another ending is not just good news, it is the best news possible.

This is the one scene in all of Mark's Gospel in which Jesus makes no appearance. I have a hunch that's not by accident. Because apart from God's promises in Jesus, what happens at that bizarre birthday party is about what one could expect when we're left to our own devices: good intentions gone bad, fearless candor rewarded with imprisonment, the triumph of the powerful over the powerless, and so it goes.

Well, if we wish to avoid being driven by the out-of-control nationalism of Jeroboam in the Kingdom of Israel, or the excruciating cowardice of Herod in trying to keep up the appearance of power as a client king in a petty kingdom, toward what kingdom shall we look? If we don't want to get mired in the quicksand of thinking that

violence, whether with words or weapons, is an acceptable option in addressing political differences, where do we find our plumb line?

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In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul sings of the truth of God's loving response to us in all the circumstances of our life, and of God's tenacious, unrelenting effort to redeem us by writing for us -- and writing us into -- a better story than we deserve or can imagine...in Christ. Maybe not so much a plumb line, but I like to picture Jesus standing on the side of the road, holding up a sign that says, "Please turn here. This is not the end of the road, even though it seems like it to you."

This is the inheritance we have obtained "in Christ." "In Christ" every experience is reframed. Joys, achievements, temptations, regrets, losses – everything is reframed. "In Christ" we are joined to the power and presence of God. "In Christ" we are knit together with others who will cry over our dead with us even as they help us sing hymns of resurrection.

It is in and through Christ, my friends that, as the Collect says, "we may both perceive and know what things we ought to do, and also may have grace and power to accomplish them." Our plumb line is the risen and living Christ.

Paul ends his letter to the Ephesians ends with this blessing of our abundant God: *Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever (3:20).* And let the people say, Amen.