

A sermon preached on July 14, 2024, the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10-B
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton
Amos 7:7-15. Psalm 85:8-13. Ephesians 1:3-14. Mark 6:14-29

Have you ever been confused and bewildered by some of the stories in the Bible, including some of the stories we heard this morning?

My family knows that I don't like to watch movies or TV shows filled with sex and violence. I get up and walk out. Yet this morning, our gospel tells the story of Herod's daughter doing an exotic, X-rated dance before drunken Herod and his drunken guests at a feast for his birthday. Then at Herod's invitation she asks for and receives the freshly cut off head of John the Baptist on a platter as her reward for evoking the sex lusts of the men at the drunken orgy. This kind of story makes me want to walk out the door right now.

Then, to push us further out of our comfort zones, the point of the story has to do with God and politicians. God sent a prophet, John the Baptizer, to tell Herod, the ruthless Roman appointed leader over part of Israel, that his behavior violated the way God created human beings to live with each other on this planet.

The back story was, on a trip to Rome, Herod stopped to spend a couple days with his brother Philip. While he was there, Herod took a liking to Philip's wife Herodias, probably with her enticing participation. After all, Herod had more money and political power than Philip and she was greedy for more of both. So, Herod left his brother's house and continued on to Rome taking Philip's wife with him and made her his wife because he had the power to do whatever he wanted.

Before his trip to Rome, Herod had a habit of inviting John to visit the palace and talk with him. While Herod was an arrogant, brutal man, he must have sensed that John was in touch with God, an honest man who told the truth, which was very different from Herod's advisors who always told Herod what he wanted to hear. After Herod returned to Jerusalem from Rome, John was typically honest and direct with Herod: "It is not lawful before God for you to take your brother's wife and make her your wife." Herod was used to John's honesty, but his new wife Herodias had a grudge against John for speaking against her marriage to Herod. She insisted that Herod arrest John and put him in prison, which Herod did. She wanted John killed, but Herod respected John, so he protected him in jail. Yet Herod did not change his ruthless, ego-driven behavior. When drunken Herod and his supporters were very aroused by Salome's dancing, Herod offered to give her anything she asked. She checked with her mother, who saw the chance to murder her nemesis, John. So, she instructed Salome to ask for John's head on a platter. Herod knew that John was a good, just, honest prophet of God, not deserving of death. But he had made a promise before his followers to give Salome what she asked. Because his priority was to please his followers so he could keep his power and position, he ignored what he knew was right and just, and had John beheaded.

Like Herod and Pilate, political leaders, and all of us are tempted at times to act against what we know is right and true out of fear that acting with integrity might diminish our image and status. This strange story invites us to ask: if God sent an honest and courageous prophet like John to speak to all leaders, at all levels of our country, how would our leaders respond... and how would you and I respond to God's message of accountability? For example these are the words of accountability God

spoke through the prophet Micah who was a contemporary of Amos: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). What might God have to say to our leaders and to us about our personal track record as compared to these standards?

There is a deeply hopeful theme that is easy to miss in this story: to the followers of John, his death felt like the end of John’s influence. It seemed like evil and injustice won and God’s truth, God’s good man and integrity lost. But in God’s mysterious ways, right after the death of John the Baptist, Jesus began his public ministry. God carried on John’s message through Jesus who brought new life, truth, love, justice, healing on the other side of John’s death. And on the other side of the death of Jesus, God brought resurrection, the possibility of new beginnings on the other side of what looked like dead ends for us all. I wonder what resurrection possibilities God may have for us on the other side of whatever deaths and seeming dead ends happen in our nation and world in the coming years?

Today’s reading from Amos is another one of the many challenging Biblical stories of God sending prophets to hold nations, political and religious leaders, and us ordinary people accountable for our actions. Amos was a farmer who cared for sheep and goats and tended sycamore trees in Judah, which was in southern Israel. One day in 760 BCE, God spoke to him in a vision and told him to go and speak to the political and religious leaders of Northern Israel. Things had been peaceful and prosperous in the country of Northern Israel for a while. But the prosperity came at great cost because the very wealthy had gradually and dishonestly taken over people’s property, taken control of the economy and the government for their economic benefit, while the majority of the country, especially the poor, were struggling to survive. God sent this very unlikely herdsman, Amos, with a challenging message for the nation of Northern Israel.

God showed Amos a vision of God standing beside a wall with a plumb line. A plumbline was used by masons as they built walls and buildings out of stone and bricks. A plumbline worked like this. A string was attached to a weight. When the string was held steady at the top, by gravity, the weight would mark a perfectly straight line between the top and the bottom of the string and between the top and bottom of a wall. This plumb line was very important because if a wall is not plumb, it is unstable and in danger of falling.

God asked Amos, what do you see? Amos said, “a plumb line”. God said, “I’ve hung a plumbline in the midst of my people in Northern Israel” and it is clear that they are living dangerously out of line with the way I created them to live. I’ve lost my patience with their unfaithful ways of living. So Northern Israel and their king will be destroyed by foreign armies because their society, and especially the very wealthy’s persistent greed and injustice toward their neighbors, particularly toward the poor, are too far out of plum with my expectations when I created them. The nation will fall and be destroyed.

Amos spoke God’s command, but his message was not welcomed with open arms by leaders in Northern Israel. The king’s priest threatened to have Amos killed. He tried to silence Amos and force him out of the country for undermining confidence in the power and control of the king. Amos responded very directly, like John did with Herod. He told the king’s priest; I didn’t come here because I was paid by someone to come and upset this country. I’m just a herdsman, who’s been

working on my farm. It was God who pushed me out of my comfort zone to confront God's people in this nation with God's message.

Both John and Amos remind us and remind people of every nation and every generation that the Creator of the Universe evaluates our lives on this planet very differently than the political, economic and military standards by which we humans evaluate our nations and ourselves. For example, a few years after Amos spoke God's message, the Assyrian armies conquered Northern Israel and either killed or deported most of the population. The nation disappeared and is now referred to as the ten lost tribes of Israel.

Remembering God's message to Northern Israel, Amos invites us to ask a very uncomfortable question: in what ways is the United States in line with or out of line with the God's plumbline expressed through the prophet Micah of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God?

While people on the political right and left are pointing fingers at each other and saying that the other side may cause the destruction of the United States, Amos pushes us to ask a much more ominous question which is uncomfortable for most of us: has our nation, like Northern Israel, already strayed so far from God's plumbline of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God that God is warning us in this politically chaotic time, that God may have lost patience with the attitudes, priorities words and actions of our nation, and that God may allow our country as we have known it, to come to an end and fall like an out of plumb wall?

God has not spoken to me like God spoke to Amos, so I do not know God's specific answers to these difficult questions. I do know that John and Amos challenge us to see that there is much more going on in our world and nation than what politicians and the media talk about. The God who created the universe is the one who holds the plumb line and is ultimately in charge of the direction of the universe. We find the right direction for our lives by looking to our Creator and focusing on living in-line, in plumb with God's commands to do justly, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Jesus summarized God's expectations simply: love God with your whole being and love your neighbors as yourself, including your enemies.

Perhaps God's invitation to us from today's readings is to ask ourselves, how can we help each other and help our nation live more in line with God's commands during this politically chaotic and anxious time? How can we embody God's hope for our nation and world? There is no one simple answer; we need to keep asking ourselves and talking with each other about what God is expecting of us in the challenging months and years ahead.

Let's close our eyes and be still with God and these haunting Biblical stories and questions for a few moments...

One spiritually grounding practice that can help us keep focused on God's plumb line of guidance for how to live personally and as a nation is to use some the prayers in the back of the prayer book at home, especially when we get anxious about our nation and world. They can help us look at life from God's perspective, and not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the anxieties, attitudes, words and actions of our society and world.

Please take a Book of Common Prayer and turn with me to page 810.

Notice that beginning on page 810 is a list of prayers about many different topics. I will lead us through a few of these prayers now, on topics raised by the Scriptures we have heard this morning.

Let us begin by turning to page 815 and pray together prayer #3.

Let us pray prayer #6 on the next page.

Turning to page 821 let us pray #22 which is a litany.

Next let us pray # 24 on page 822.

Finally let us pray the audacious prayer 27 on page 823.

O gracious God, help us this week, to learn to pray and live more in line with your purpose for us, with the help of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.