

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead New York
Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 10B– July 11, 2021

Amos 7:7-15

Ephesians 1:3-14

Psalms 85:8-13

Mark 6:14-29

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN!

While we may be enjoying time off during the summer, God calls us still to be people of justice and mercy. God sent prophets to call the chosen people back from their sinful lives, and God sends the word of the Lord through those same prophets to us today to repent, to reform our lives and to return to our Lord.

Amos claimed that he wasn't a prophet – that he was simply a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees from Judah, the southern kingdom, but God had called him to deliver the message about how far the house of Israel had strayed from God's word. God used a visual aid that was so simple anyone could recognize it: a plumb line set against a wall to show the people of Israel how far from the straight and narrow they had strayed.

Yet even though the symbolism was plain, Amaziah, the priest of Bethel (which means "the house of the Lord") didn't read the message correctly. Not only did he challenge Amos's delivery of the word of the Lord, but he also reported Amos as a traitor to King Jeroboam of Israel. The offense was the prophesy: the consequences of Israel's faithlessness would be the destruction of the sanctuaries of Israel, the northern kingdom, and exile of the people because they had not been true to their covenant – their agreement with God to be God's faithful people so that the Lord could be their God.

We know that, after Amos' time, the people of Israel did indeed, find themselves overcome militarily by their enemy Babylon. The magnificent temple, which had taken Solomon so many years to build, was destroyed, burned, crushed to rubble, with the sacred vessels used during worship taken to Babylon to be used as banquet dishes by the king of Babylon. And the people who were able, those who had skills, trades and abilities, were taken to Babylon to live in exile for generations, serving as slaves of their long-standing enemy.

Was this God's punishment? I would say, rather, that it was God treating the people

of Israel as they had treated the Lord. Israel worshiped idols and didn't concern itself with the laws, the rules for living in unity with God, so God simply left Israel on their own, to make their own way, since they didn't seem to think that they needed God's partnership.

Similarly, we hear in the Gospel lesson how John the Baptizer was treated by King Herod. He had been called by God to bring the message of repentance to the people: reminding them that, once again, they had strayed from the straight and narrow.

The chosen people were living under the occupation of the Roman government. King Herod of Judea –himself a Jew – but appointed by the Romans to keep the rest of the Jews obedient to foreign rule, not only sided with the Romans in controlling the Jews. No, even more, he so disregarded YHWH, the Lord, in that he violated the laws of Leviticus, the rules of life for the covenant people, by marrying his brother Philip's wife, Herodias, after Philip's death. Now, we may remember that there was the practice of "levirate marriage," when a younger brother married his older brother's widow after the older brother's death. But this was required ONLY when the older brother had not had children with his wife. In the case of Philip and Herodias, there was offspring: a daughter.

John made no secret of his charges against King Herod: he told Herod himself, and he also told the public. We might say that this was a first century "Me Too" outing of an abuser of a woman. Herod feared John because he recognized that the Baptizer was a holy and righteous man. Interestingly, he also like to listen to John and yet he was afraid to challenge him because of his popularity with the public, but Herodias was offended by John's accusations and wanted revenge against him.

So Mark gives us this extraordinary account of Herod's birthday celebration, told as a "flashback" at a later date, when he was concerned with the preaching that Jesus' disciples were carrying out among the people of Judea. The gruesome story of Herodias' vengeance against John the Baptizer is that she used her daughter (also called Herodias), who must have been a very talented dancer, to force her husband Herod to put an end to John's prophesying and calling for repentance by cutting off his head.

The account of the death of John the Baptizer foreshadows the death of Jesus. It describes a relationship between the bearers of God's message and the powers that

be – the political powers. And the relevance of that relationship continued beyond the lives of John and Jesus. In fact, it has been central to the followers of Jesus and our message to the world for more than 2000 years.

But what do we think? Is this dynamic the word of the Lord rising up against political power still relevant to our faith, to our fidelity in Christian life today? Do we hear Amos' call for justice and mercy to return to God in our society? If so, who speaks the prophetic words today? People who call for us to change our society, for instance, are the Black Lives Matter demonstrators, so that it's clear that the lives of people of color matter in our country as much as pale ones do. And devastatingly, like the call to repentance that Amos and John urged on the public in their days, the call to our leaders to do justice for people of color, as they do with paler people hasn't become unnecessary with time. The demonstrations of a year ago following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police have ceased for the most part, perhaps with the conviction of Derek Chauvin, perhaps with the end of the Trump administration. But with few exceptions, the police reforms called for last summer, including de-escalation training, provision of trained mental health professionals for people in crisis and other means of assuring police accountability, have not been put in place around the country.

And after eight years, the call for Black lives to matter clearly still hasn't been heard, or if it has been heard, it isn't being heeded. We don't have yet another fatal encounter between police and an unarmed man of color this week. But we do have the actions of several state legislatures, especially in the south, to enact laws that are designed to make it more difficult for people of color to vote so that control of those states will remain in the hands of white people who oppose equity between people of different ethnicities.

And we have the on-going travesty of hundreds of children of immigrants who may or may not have crossed our southern border illegally still living miles away from their parents who have been deported or who are being held in jails because records weren't kept of the families when the children were separated from their parents. Is this separation not the official beheading of the thousands of families, like John was dealt with, cutting his head from his body? We can only hope and pray that, with time, researchers will identify the location of parents so that the lives of the families that are torn apart now, might be brought back together to end the trauma of this forced separation.

The voices of Amos and John can still be heard in 2021: there are outcries by the

public and justice and mercy are being done by some agencies, such as Lutheran Social Services and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, to care for the children and parents until they can be reunited and their lives – already broken by extreme poverty and violence in their homelands that drove them to come to the United States – can have hope, peace and joy restored to them.

Let's pray... for people who are harmed by the injustice of official actions, especially those of the police;

for people of color throughout this country who seek only to live full lives in peace and to exercise their constitutional right to vote;

for families who have fled violence and death in their homelands, seeking safety and security here in the US;

for families who have been separated through our government's official actions to try to stop them from seeking safety and security, that they may be reunited;

for us as followers of Jesus to speak out and otherwise make known our support for people who are treated inequitably. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. C: AMEN