

Sunday, July 15, 2018
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 10 (Year B)
Amos 7.7-15; Ephesians 1.3-14; Mark 6.14-29
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Really? REALLY? This is what we've got to work with today? As if it weren't bad enough that last week we had to tackle the story of Jesus' being rejected and rendered powerless while visiting Nazareth, today we have two story that are, to say the least, real downers. The impending destruction of Israel, and the beheading of John the Baptist.

Our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Amos probably needs a little bit of backstory, to set the context. The writings of Amos deal with God's condemnation of the Northern Kingdom of Israel because of the greed and corruption of its rulers and the failure of the religious leaders to follow God's command for justice. As a result, the people, following the example of their leaders, fail to live justly with one another. We hear Amos declaring God's judgment against the people for these transgressions. Judgment that will ultimately lead to the destruction of Israel and the exile of the people at the hands of the Assyrians.

Then there is our Gospel reading from Mark, recounting a story of adultery, jealousy, and revenge. A story that has an underlying foundation of thirst for power, greed, and manipulation. A story, like that of Amos, that features the powerful elite who are more concerned with their own well-being than with the proper exercise of justice. A story that ends with the gruesome murder of an innocent man to satisfy the vengeful bloodlust of Herodias. A gruesome murder that Herod allowed because of his political ambitions and his weakness of character.

So where's the good news in today's lectionary readings?

Sandwiched between the accounts of Amos and John the Baptist is the Epistle reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. This reading for today, which is from the introduction to Paul's letter, sets the theological foundation for what is to follow in the letter. It is a creedal description of the Christian faith. A blessing that reflects on the activity of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and what we have obtained through their activity. A concise expression of God's plan for salvation.

In his introductory comments, Paul offers a summary of the richness of God's grace. How God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." That in this chosen-ness, we are meant "to be holy and blameless . . . in love." That we were "destined . . . for adoption as [God's] children" as an expression of "his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us." In this state of adoption and grace, our sins have been forgiven and we have received "redemption through [Christ's] blood." As his adopted children, God has also "made known to us the mystery of his will" and "a plan for the fullness of time," whereby all "things in heaven and things on earth" are gathered to him. "In Christ we have . . . obtained an inheritance," which is "the word of truth, the gospel of [our] salvation." In our baptisms, we are "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit," which is a "pledge of our inheritance . . . as God's own people." And because of all this, we "live for the praise of his glory."

And while there is a lot of good news in Paul's statement, the Old Testament and Gospel readings seem to overshadow this abundance of love and grace. And frankly, it would be all too easy to sidestep the difficult parts, the gory bits in our lectionary readings in favor of preaching a nice comfortable message based on Paul's creedal statement of what it means to be a child of God. But what Paul conveys is not the whole story. What the likes of John the Baptist convey is that being a child of God is not always nice and easy and comfortable.

Today's Gospel reading is unique in many respects – aside from the goriness of it. First, Mark is known for his brevity, for quickly moving on to the next story. But here, he lingers. He spends sixteen verses painstakingly recounting the details leading to the gruesome beheading of John the Baptist – a veritable novella compared to the rest of the accounts in his Gospel. Second, this is the only story in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus does not make an appearance. And third, it is told as a flashback. This is the only time Mark uses this particularly literary device. All of this tells us that something significant is going on here. Something that must be paid attention to.

One common understanding by scholars as to why this particular scene is featured in Mark's Gospel is that it can be viewed as drawing parallels between the demise of John the Baptist and that of Jesus Christ—John's beheading foreshadowing Jesus' Passion. Both at odds with the authorities—John at odds with King Herod and Jesus at odds with the temple authorities and Pontius Pilate. Both John and Jesus a threat to corrupt political power. Both rising in popularity to the point that the respective political powers feel threatened and fear rebellion by the people. Both Herod and Pilate placing their standing among their peers ahead of their sense of justice. Both John and Jesus promptly executed to shut them up and to serve as an example to their followers. While the parallels are striking and compelling, the placement of the story of the beheading of John the Baptist within Mark's Gospel is significant, placing it in a different context.

The account of the beheading of John the Baptist actually interrupts the account of Jesus' disciples being sent out to engage in ministry on behalf of Jesus. As you may recall, last week we heard Jesus give instructions to his disciples and then send them out two-by-two (Mk 6.6b-13). It is only after the flashback about John the Baptist that the disciples return—the verse following today's Gospel—and they “gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught” (Mk 6.30).

So, does interrupting a story of the ministry of Jesus' followers with the tale of John the Baptist's demise actually have something to do with the nature of ministry? Let's see.

While today's Gospel appears to be about the beheading of John the Baptist, the real key lies with the reason not for his beheading, but for his imprisonment by Herod in the first place. That being the message that he proclaimed. He had called into question the legitimacy of Herod's marriage to Herodias. According to Mosaic Law, a man is forbidden to marry the wife of his brother while the brother is still living. In condemning Herod and Herodias, the Baptist was really preaching about adherence to God's laws. And in a broader context, the demand for justice. Of course, in some respects, this was just a convenient excuse. The real motive behind John's arrest was likely political. John's growing popularity posed a potential threat to Herod's

control over the area and could have led to rebellion. Thanks to John, the people were becoming attuned to the corruption of the political and temple authorities. They were experiencing a repentance of their own—receiving a new-found clarity regarding the injustices of government and how that impacted society, and recognizing that these were against God’s Divine law. Even Herod himself recognizes something of this. He sees in John the Baptist a righteousness, a holiness—that at the same time scares him and intrigues him. However, saving face is more important than repenting, of changing his ways. Protecting his own interests is more important than following his instincts and saving John. He is more enamored with political power than learning about, even embracing, the power portrayed by John. As a result, he is willing to compromise truth, justice, and compassion because he thinks it will gain him political power and the favor of the elite of his day.

Our Gospel shows that despite potential threat to self, John was willing to be faithful to the message he proclaimed—to God’s message. He was willing to continue speaking against those who violate God’s laws. He was willing to continue speaking against injustice as it played out on the social and political stage of his day.

While the original context of this story may have been a warning to the early Christian community that their fervent preaching may lead to martyrdom, that is not the case today. Well, at least not martyrdom in terms of being put to death for our beliefs. At least not in this country. But it is a message that being obedient to God’s word and faithfully proclaiming it may not always be easy. We may be ridiculed, shunned, even rejected, by some because of what we proclaim. But this is what it means to be children of God. To be inheritors of the grace and love that Paul tells us about in his Epistle. That we are to share that grace and love, no matter the cost to self.

So where is the good news in today’s readings? The Gospel lesson reminds us that the task of following Jesus isn’t about basking in the glory of the kumbaya moments, reveling in the personal benefit of what Paul talks about in the introduction to Ephesians. While these characteristics of being adopted children of God provide joy and are uplifting, they are not enough. For what Paul preaches is more than mere platitudes. These are fundamental truths about who God is and about who we are as God’s people. It’s about knowing that these are foundational truths of our life of faith, giving us strength to face the difficult situations, just as Amos did and just as John the Baptist did. It’s about putting it on the line—to speak what we know to be the truth.

We are not alone in this sacred work. Remember, the disciples were sent out to preach a message of repentance. Turning from and speaking out against injustice, oppression, hatred—the sins of the world—is what repentance is about. It is about turning away from these sins of the worlds and turning toward God’s message of love for one another. This calling puts us firmly in the company of the likes of the prophets Amos and John the Baptist, of the disciples and Jesus himself. We are all called to be prophets, delivering a message of a better way, a message of grace and love. As spiritual director Paula Franck writes, “A prayer attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero reminds us that ‘We are prophets of a future not our own.’ What is the future that prophets such as John, and other Spirit-filled men and women, call us to envision?” Our job is to proclaim that vision and to work to make it a reality.