

8 Pentecost, Proper 10, Yr. B

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Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Professors of homiletics stress that preachers should always find the good news in the scriptures. And, since England is in the news these days, there's a story about Peter Gomes who attended an Anglican service, after which he spoke with the Queen Mother who said, "I so like a bit of good news on a Sunday, don't you?" And Gomes said that even though he'd found the sermon to be mediocre, he could only reply yes. On that same topic, of preaching the good news, Martin Luther is said to have advised that the preacher may need to squeeze the Scripture verse until good news emerges. Well, neither the Amos reading nor the Gospel has very good news this morning. The good news can be found in the Letter to the Ephesians, which reminds us who we are: chosen in Christ, freely given grace, redeemed, forgiven, and maybe most important, given the wisdom and insight to know God's plan in Christ, which is to gather up all things, in heaven and on earth. A few verses later, the writer reminds us that we have heard the word of truth. And no one would deny that all of that is very good news.

But professors of homiletics also remind preachers that preaching involves both comfort and challenge. And even in that Ephesian letter, while there's grace and comfort, there's also challenge: to be chosen, to be given insight into God's plan, comes with the awesome responsibility to live according to that plan. To live lives that will further that plan and show that plan to the wider world. In a very real way, because of our baptism and our call to live in Christ, we're called to be prophets.

And that brings us to the other two readings, both of which are full of challenge and short on comfort. The questions we looked at last week, about distinguishing between true and false prophets are very much with us again in these scriptures.

Let's start with Amos. First some context. By the time of Amos, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, B.C., Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Judah in the South and Israel in the North. It's important to note that Amos is from the south, but he's prophesying in the north. At the time he arrives in the North, the Kingdom of Israel is flying high. The King, Jeroboam, has managed to expand the kingdom, partly because the Assyrians have not yet become a great power in the region. As a result, Israel is rich, comfortable and powerful. But that's only part of the story: it's also corrupt and either ignoring or exploiting the poor.

Amos denies that he's a prophet and says that he's a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees in Judah. But he also says that God laid his hand upon him – CHOSE him – to speak God's word to Israel. Amos has a number of visions and the one we heard about today is about a wall and plumb line. As you know, plumb lines are just strings with a weight on one end – you hold them up, in this case against a wall, and gravity does the rest, showing a straight line. In this case, Israel is the wall and the only thing to do with a wall that isn't straight is to knock it down. Amos says that the plumb line held against Israel isn't straight. They've been tried, he says, and found wanting. Amos is railing that the people have forgotten right from wrong; they've forgotten that God's chosen are supposed to be living God's justice and righteousness which was what had allowed Israel to survive as a community in the first place. The rich, he

says, are lying on couches in palaces of ivory, enjoying sumptuous feasts, while they are buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. The merchants can hardly wait for the Sabbath to be finished so that can go back to selling and using crooked weights and measures. You know better, he says. The original wall represents knowledge of right and wrong that is inherent in all humans, that predates law codes. You know better and you have forsaken your role as God's chosen, so the end is coming. Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. And just like the folks in last week's Scriptures, the people turn a deaf ear. Who wants to listen to this? It's all bad news. It's not surprising that the folks in the Northern Kingdom don't welcome either Amos or his message. Now we hear from the false prophet, the one who works for the king. He tells the king that Amos is conspiring against him – he's got to go. And it's interesting to note that this must be happening at Bethel. You'll remember that's where Jacob had the dream of the ladder with angels coming up and down – and when he woke he declared that "surely God is in this place." Now, however, Amaziah calls Bethel the king's sanctuary and a temple for the kingdom. In effect, he's saying that God's words aren't welcome there. We don't know what happens to Amos, but we do know that his prophecy was fulfilled when Assyria conquers and destroys Israel.

When we turn to Mark's Gospel, there's a similar story. We don't know what became of Amos, but we certainly know what happened to John. Mark tells the whole story, which is a bit like some kind of TV series – it has it all: illicit marriage, a touch of lust, greed, ambition, fear, murder. John has been telling Herod that his marriage, to his brother's wife, is not legal under the law. Herodias isn't happy with this message and convinces Herod to imprison John, undoubtedly waiting a further chance to get rid of him. But Herod's relationship with John is an interesting one. On one level, he appears to want to hear what John has to say; on another level he fears John's growing power. At a banquet of people who must have been important to Herod and his somewhat tenuous grip on power, Herodias' daughter dances, Herod makes the colossal mistake of telling her he'll grant whatever she wishes, is appalled when she asks for John's head, but is apparently afraid to lose face. So he saves face and John loses his head.

The Jewish philosopher and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel has written a 2-volume work about the prophets. In it, he points out that prophets are utterly unlike philosophers. Philosophers, he says, are easier to take, since they're more abstract and "construct elegant mansions in the mind." By contrast, the prophets are very concrete and they hassle us about widows and orphans, about corruption and decadence and about our responsibility. So while we may see a single act of injustice as a slight problem, they see it as a disaster. While we understand that injustice is injurious to the welfare of a people, they see it as a death blow to the people's existence; where we see an episode, they see a catastrophe. While we think their reaction is disproportionate, they bewail the fact that we don't really SEE what's going on at all.

All of this makes me think about what the Bible is for and how we read it. There's a rabbinic story about a student who went to his Rabbi and proudly announced that he'd been through the Bible three times! And the Rabbi's response? "Ah, yes, but has the Bible been through you?" Can we allow the Bible to both comfort and challenge us? There are several time-honored suggestions about how to read that sacred book. One is to imagine which of the characters you are in the story. Where would we be in the Amos reading? Or in Mark? Here's another: some

things in the Bible are time and culture bound, but some of them are timeless and we need to note the difference. With regard to those that are timeless, one contemporary theologian has said that we need to read the Bible and the newspaper at the same time. His point was that there are truths in the Bible that have to do with human nature and our human affairs that seemingly never change – looking at Amos and Mark, can't we see ourselves and our society in their words? Aren't we tempted to turn a deaf ear to things we don't want to hear? Things that remind us who we are and what we're to be about? Things that challenge us to examine how true and straight our wall is? And looking at Mark, can't we see those same human behaviors today? The desire to have and then hang on to power; the fear of losing face; the anger at being called to account.

And yet, to end with Ephesians, the good news is that we KNOW who we are and where we're going and, therefore, how we're to live in the meantime. And perhaps a good way to end is again with Paul, this time his words to the Colossians:

“As children of God, then, the holy people whom he loves, you are to be clothed in heartfelt compassion, in generosity and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another, forgive each other if one of you has a complaint against another...Over all these...put on love, the perfect bond. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts....” We know who we are and how we're supposed to be living. We have many opportunities every day, some big, some small, to live as those chosen people. Amen.