

Those of you who know Mother Barb well would not probably think of her as someone who likes to live on the edge—yet, here she's gone and invited me to preach a second time. You might, however, imagine her saying, "Don't abuse the privilege."

Prompted by the lectionary texts for today, I'd like for us ponder just what it means to have personal encounters that count. Not just casual conversations, but encounters that quicken your heartbeat or during which you discover something vitally important that you share in common, or that evoke an emotional response to some sort of challenge.

The Bible is chock full of encounter stories, of course. Recall David's rendezvous with Bathsheba after observing her bathing from his rooftop. After she discovers that she's pregnant, the story continues with David using Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, as the courier to the battlefield with the message that would seal his fate.

Don't you suspect Uriah knew something was up when David was suddenly acting as if he were his best friend rather than his king, plying him with drinks and repeatedly encouraging him to go sleep with Bathsheba. Put yourself in Uriah's place, and give David a long look into his eyes when he gives you that sealed message!

So we're not just talking about having a casual conversation, like chatting about the Packers latest game, or if the fall colors have maxed out yet, or planning that winter getaway with your spouse. I'm talking about encounters where you're being asked, in effect, what are you going to do with the rest of your life or what really counts with you in your relationships with others or what exactly are your priorities these days.

If the book named after the prophet Amos conveys anything of his personality, he's a guy unafraid of expressing his opinion, and asking similar questions, especially since he believes he's speaking for God.

One morning recently when I was lying in bed, and not wanting to get up, I got to thinking about the texts for today, and, especially, Amos. I imagined being a fellow traveler with Amos as he was making his way from his small village down south in Judah where he's was farmer up to the more sophisticated capital of Israel, Samaria.

As I imagined us trudging up and down the hills of Palestine, Amos is waxing eloquent with what he intends to say, and I'm having to admit he got a way with words. But I'm also thinking, what are the odds for a favorable reception? It's a bit like a Door County cherry orchard owner going down to Milwaukee or Chicago to set those people straight.

Listen to some of the imagery he uses found in chapters prior to our morning text. How does he come across to you?

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!"

*Thus says the Lord,
They sell the innocent for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.
They trample on the heads of the poor
as on the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.*

*In the house of their god
they drink wine taken as fines.
They lie down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge.*

*I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

Actually, I imagined two different conversations as a fellow traveler with Amos. In the first conversation, I'm a pious Jew returning to Israel after visiting the temple in Jerusalem, and I'm saying, "That's exactly what's happening. We were taught that the scales of justice were to be tilted in favor of the poor and oppressed, but these days, they just tilt the other way. Righteousness is not happening, at least among our elites. The haves are getting havier and the have-nots are getting nottier.

Then I ask the question: "What's going to prompt them listen to you, Amos? What would motivate them? Don't you think they've heard threats before about what God will do?" Just the same, we could be asking ourselves, how ready are we for dialogue if someone is attacking our lifestyle? Hmmm. . . Like many of us when we've gotten on our high horse, I'm not sure Amos would have wanted to hear those questions.

Now in my second imagined conversation, I take on the role of a time traveler from 21st century America. “Let me tell you, Amos, save your breath. It’s not going to work. As a matter of fact, neither you nor any of the other biblical prophets will ever manage to effect any change noted in the biblical texts. It seems that it’s only in hindsight that people can see things in proper perspective, or be self-critical.” You know—woulda, shoulda, coulda

Of course, I’m only suggesting these conversations because, in order to grapple with Amos’ message, we need to actually have these sorts of conversations with ourselves. What will or what does move us to change some part of our lives, or our priorities? Are we ever proactive about change—or just reactive? What kinds of messages are we ready to hear? Do prophets such as Amos ever speak to us? If so, in what way?

Here’s a key to understanding biblical narratives: **Sometimes they show us one thing important while the actual text is telling us something different.**

Here’s my big takeaway from Amos—he had his finger on the pulse of a morally disintegrating Israel, and he was really articulate and graphic in describing that decay. . .but the narrative shows he wasn’t evoking any change by the manner he was trying to get his message across. (Maybe he’d be satisfied knowing that he got a book in the Bible named after him!)

THE Gospels are full of stories about Jesus having encounters with all sorts of people. Our text today captures one of those—Jesus engaging the rich young ruler. Listen again:

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “You know the commandments about murder; adultery; stealing; bearing false witness; honoring your parents.” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

If we perceive that Jesus is confronting this man about his wealth, we’re not quite getting the picture: It’s not his wealth per se, but his attachment to it. Jesus is inviting him to expand his view of investments. He doesn’t recognize that his wealth just might be getting in the way of seeing some other possibilities for what he might do or become. He’s not recognizing the likelihood that he could lose his wealth and his quality of life might not suffer one iota.

Our sense of identity is often wrapped up in what we possess or what we treasure. Try this question on for size: What could you lose that would cause you to grieve, just like that rich man? Or—what do you possess so that you'd be shocked if someone like Jesus suggested that it's getting in your way of seeing what's important?

In the movie, *A THOUSAND CLOWNS*, the principal character, Murray, is an undisciplined, eccentric writer who is also guardian of his nephew, Norman. He's being investigated by child protective services regarding his bohemian lifestyle. Here's what he says to the social worker:

“I just want him to stay with me until I can be sure he won't turn into Norman Nothing. I want to be sure he'll know when he's chickening out on himself. I want him to get to know exactly the special thing he is or else he won't notice it when it starts to go. I want him to stay awake and know who the phonies are. I want to be sure he sees all the wild possibilities. I want him to know it's worth all the trouble just to give the world a little goosing when you get the chance. And I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason why he was born a human being and not a chair.”

Jesus, by saying, “Come, follow me”, is saying to the rich man, “I want you to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason why you were born a human being and not just some ruler.” Come, follow me, and see what's going on with this group of men I've gathered. Witness our honesty, our investing in addressing the needs of others, the way we're bonding with each other. Follow me, and see how we're making our encounters with others count.

That's what Jesus is referring to when he says

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—and in the age to come— eternal life.

Notice two dynamics illustrated here that we repeatedly find in Jesus' interactions people: He questions, sometimes cajoling, sometimes challenging—and He invites.

Jesus is inviting him—and us—to an enlarged life. When we understand what Jesus is up to, when we understand that he himself was the Word of God personified, we can better understand our text from Hebrews, which begins:

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from

marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Here's the catch—**The word of God doesn't become living and active unless we're open and invested in it doing so.** Stories about Jesus become electric when we place ourselves in the shoes of those biblical characters, when we become the rich ruler or the perplexed Peter. The spark happens too when we allow ourselves to be questioned by the biblical texts themselves.

Take Psalm 90, our psalm for today, as an example, listen to these words occurring just prior to our lectionary passage.

*Lord, You turn people back to dust,
saying, "Return to dust, you mortals.
A thousand years in your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep people away in the sleep of death—
they are like the new grass of the morning:
In the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it is dry and withered.*

Then comes the pivot point of the psalm, in my opinion

Teach us to number our days so that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Here are some implied questions lurking when we enter into the world of that Psalm and allow it to engage us:

1st big question: What does it mean to number our days?

- Does it mean to be mindful of having only a limited life span?
- Does it mean being intentional about making each day count?
- Does it mean exercising certain gifts we've been given as an act of grateful stewardship?
- How would YOU answer those questions?

2nd big question: How is wisdom gained when we number our days? For starters, we don't gain the heart of wisdom by merely assenting to the assurances that the scriptures offer. Rather, our wisdom is enlarged by grappling with the questions that are an implicit part of its narratives. Gaining wisdom involves developing the capacity to see and do the things that make a difference.

In his book, THE ROAD TO CHARACTER, David Brooks writes:

Recently I've been thinking about the difference between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success.

The eulogy virtues are deeper. They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you're kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.

What Amos, the Psalmist, the writer of Hebrews and Jesus share in common is this: They're challenging or inviting us to focus on eulogy virtues, especially what it means to be a person fully alive, finding significance in the activities that engage us, and constructively encountering and supporting our community.

For many of us, one day we well may be memorialized in this very room. A couple of lingering questions from today might be: What will be the eulogy virtues that people will most often mention when they remember us? Will one of those virtues be that we understood deeply the message of the gospel?

If we start asking each other these questions, I'm sure we'll experience some energizing personal encounters. So be it!

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