

Pentecost 7, 7.11.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85:8-13; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

“Set your hope on Christ”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Today’s readings are not easy, but they are important for what they share about the reality of our humanity and the forgiving love of God. In Christ, God makes us children, members of God’s household and family, the body of Christ. Today’s readings are about “the big picture” of God’s work in us as we set our hope on Christ.

Today’s readings concern two prophets, Amos and John the Baptist. Both Amos and John the Baptist were called by God to speak God’s word to Israel, and in doing so, they angered the religious and political powers of their day.

In today’s gospel, John the Baptist spoke plainly that Herod had broken God’s law (Leviticus 18:16, 20:21) by marrying his brother’s wife. Yet Mark tells us that Herod also believed that John was a prophet, and that Herod sought to protect him. These two things tell us a lot about Herod: he was haunted by both sin and by goodness. In spite of being criticized by John, Herod feared and respected him. Herod was very human, and in him, we also glimpse our own humanity. Are we so different? We also live within the contradiction of trying to reconcile our sinfulness, failures and mistakes with our faith and love for God.

The prophet Amos, like John the Baptist, was a prophet sent to speak truth to power in his day. Amos angered the religious establishment by saying plainly that God had set “a plumb line” in the midst of God’s people, Israel. Through Amos God told Israel, “*See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.*” It is little wonder that Amaziah the priest of Bethel was angered, telling King Jeroboam, “*the land is not able to bear all his words.*”

In Amos and Amaziah we see the contrast between the prophet and the priest. Amaziah the priest was close to the royal throne and the royal ear; Amaziah enjoyed the support of Jeroboam, and no doubt had influence over royal decisions. On the other hand, the prophet Amos received his message directly from God, was answerable to only God, and spoke truth to power, even to the priest and the king. A clash between the priest Amaziah and the prophet Amos was inevitable.

Amos did not sugarcoat God’s message to Israel. He reminded Israel that they has been poor and enslaved, yet they had forgotten this part of their history, and were now oppressing the poor in their midst. Amos said,

*Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria...Alas*

*for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches...eat lambs from the flock...who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Amos 6:1ff).*

Amos painted a picture of a nation at ease with wealth, and ill at ease with the poor and the oppressed in their midst. Through Amos, God said,

*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21ff)*

Amos reminded Israel that God was concerned for the poor and oppressed, and that God expected the nation to also be concerned with justice and righteousness for those who are oppressed. With words like these it is not hard to understand why the priest Amaziah was angered by Amos.

God's message to Israel had been consistent, when they were weak and enslaved, God remembered and freed them. Yet they soon forgot that they had been weak and powerless, becoming oppressors of the weak in their society. Amos revealed God's concern for the innocent, the poor and the weak. Through Amos, God's words continue to ring out to us today: "*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*" This is the "plumb line" that God continues to set in the midst of all nations and every society.

Set against this background, the example of King Herod is important, because though Herod wanted to protect John, Herod let his fears about public opinion sway him. Herod could have easily said, "Herodias, what you ask is not possible. John is a holy man, sent of God. You can ask me for anything that is mine, but I do not have control over the things of God." Yet he did not. So often with public leadership there is a failure of nerve to do what is morally and ethically right, instead acting in accordance with public opinion and the ways of the world.

Such is the contrast between John and Amos, and Amaziah and Herod. The leader faces a dilemma: will they use their God given power for justice and righteousness or for the maintenance of public power and the supporters who enable that power? These stories reveal that as sinful human beings and as a world, we have not changed very much. These stories reveal clearly that God stands on the side of the powerless and the weak. God continues to set "a plumb line" in the midst of all nations and every society.

A plum line is used the construction of buildings to make sure that the vertical line is straight. God's plum line is meant to establish a vertical relationship with God so that the actions of people

and nations reflect the moral and ethical direction of God's kingdom of justice and righteousness. Another way of expressing this is the phrase "moral compass." It is important to not only be able to read the compass, but also to be able to walk in the direction to which the compass points.

Amos and John the Baptist expressed God's plumb line; they were God's "moral compass" pointing in the direction that Israel was to walk. John had said that one who was mightier than he was coming. It should not surprise us that Jesus also followed in this prophetic tradition.

Jesus clearly expressed God's plumb line and moral compass in Matthew 25:40: "*Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*" Jesus' word about the judgment of the nations stands in the prophetic tradition of Yahweh, of Amos and John the Baptist. Like Amos who said, "*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,*" Jesus said that the nations will be judged by feeding the hungry and thirsty, by clothing the naked, by welcoming the stranger, and by visiting the sick and imprisoned. God's moral compass is very consistent throughout the Bible; it is we as human beings who are fickle. Like Amaziah seeking to please the political powers that be, or Herod seeking to please his friends and supporters, we too, daily make our compromises with the world and the powers that be.

In the second reading for today, Paul writes about the mystery of God's will revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote that God's will is "*a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.*" Paul's image of God creating unity out of difference is consistent throughout Paul's writings. In Christ what has been divided and separated by human difference and acrimony becomes one, because in Christ all things are gathered up, "*the things of heaven and the things of earth.*" Gathering the things of heaven and the things of earth means unifying eternity and time. The eternity of God and the time of human history are made one in Christ.

The moral compass of the prophets and Jesus point straight in the direction of the kingdom of God. This is "the big picture" of today's readings: we do not live daily with a sense that our time and the times in which we live are related to God's eternity. We do not live with a sense that our times contain God's eternal time. Because we are driven by our own partisan likes and dislikes, by our own wanting to please others rather than God, we do not always see that the limited time we have each been given to live is the time through which God seeks to be active. Christ reveals that our humanity and God's infinity are related: this is how God seeks to work justice and righteousness in our world. We are to live as if each moment and the times in which we live are aligned with God's plumb line.

Paul encouraged the Ephesians to see that Christ reveals the moral compass of God, that we are to love and care for others who differ most profoundly from ourselves. We are to, in the words of Amos, “*let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*”

Paul call us to “set our hope on Christ.” Setting our hope on Christ means following the direction that Christ walks knowing that his compass is the only compass that unifies heaven and earth. In Christ we finally see what our humanity is capable of. Neither Amaziah nor Herod could see past the sinful power relationships that they were trapped in; they could not see that their lives were capable of the infinite love and justice of God. For Paul, to know Christ is to be sealed with the Holy Spirit and to act with justice and righteous that point to the kingdom drawing near.

Today we gather at the font along with Helen Drew, her parents Suzanna and Connor, and her sponsors, Erica and Rachel. At this font we will see again the mighty power of God that welcomes a small child into God’s family. In Holy Baptism, Helen Drew will be marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit and claimed by Christ forever.

Baptism is a reminder that God is at work in this place, that the work is God’s and the hands are ours. In baptism we are reminded that Christ unifies heaven and earth, calling us to follow him. In Christ, each moment, hour and year of our lives becomes sacred. Our time and the times in which we live is the time in which God is at work in our lives.

As you confess your faith and welcome Helen Drew into the family of God, I also encourage you to reaffirm your hope in Christ Jesus – to follow him, like a compass, throughout your lifetime. Live for justice and righteousness. Live for the weak. Live for others as Christ lives you. Forgive others as Christ forgives you.

As the great American pastor and prophet Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice.” The plumb line of God is God’s eternal arc aligning itself with the hungry and thirsty, the naked and the stranger, the sick and imprisoned so they might know God’s love. The love of God is not simply a nice warm idea; the love of God is the moral arc and compass of God. It shapes who we are as human beings and how we are to live for others.

In every person you meet, you meet Christ; in every ethnicity, gender, identity, nation and culture, you meet Christ in your neighbor. Set your hope on Christ: live for the least and the forgotten, because in living for your neighbor you live for Christ. Live as if the world will be changed by your faith. Set your hope on Christ. Amen.