

Amos 7: 7-15 & Mark 6: 14-29: Speaking Truth

Our first reading was from the tradition of the Hebrew prophet Amos. Amos belongs to the writings called the Minor Prophets—not because their message was less important than those like Isaiah with whom we are more familiar but because they are so much shorter. Amos is only nine chapters long. It may be short, but the content of the book of Amos is quiet clear in its purpose. A summary goes like this: Amos, who is not from a priestly family, has received marching orders from the Lord. “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” So Amos leaves home and goes to Israel. His message is direct and uncompromising. The opening passage tells us this—Amos was a shepherd from a small village in Judah whose life was uprooted by the Lord. In our passage today, this truth is again declared when Amos defends his stance to the priest at Bethel. Amos spoke because the Lord came to him in his occupation as he was about his normal activities of herding cattle and caring for the sycamore trees so that they would bear fruit. During Amos’ lifetime both Israel and Judah were still independent countries. It was a time of power and great prosperity for some people. The people assumed that their privilege and affluence were evidence of God’s blessings to them as the chosen people. But neither was living as the Lord had commanded since they forgot to share the fruits of their prosperity with the poor. It wasn’t that the rituals were not being observed. Sacrifices were being made in Israel at Bethel and Dan, just as they continued in Judah at Jerusalem. But justice was not found in the land. The first proclamations found in Amos are judgments about specific behaviors that are prevalent—in the surrounding nations and then closer to home—Israel and then Judah. The message is you need to change those behaviors or there will be punishment. The message is also that Israel will be judged more harshly than those surrounding nations because they know the actions being condoned by the religious and political leaders are wrong. In our passage this morning Amos has gone across the border from Judah into Israel with the message given to him. This message he brings to Bethel was received in a vision where the Lord is holding a plumb line next to a wall built using a plumb line; a wall presumably solid and straight because that is the function of a plumb line. This plumb line which measures straightness during construction connects to a term in the Hebrew language. The word for righteousness literally means to live in a straight or upright manner. So the measure of righteousness is to be applied to what has been built in Israel. Since Israel’s government and practices do not measure up according to the plumb line given to them by God, they will be destroyed. The vision itself is consistent with the opening chapters of Amos proclaiming judgment. Within those proclamations there is an urging for change, for coming back to the covenant agreement’s way of living where justice prevailed and community life was according to the Lord’s will and purpose. What is interesting is that we have here recorded a conversation between Amos and a priest at the temple in Bethel, Amaziah. For obvious reasons, the message that Amos has brought is not pleasing to the priest presiding over an official worship center of Israel. Amaziah sends to the king, Jeroboam II, a report about Amos’ unsettling words to the people in which he accuses Amos of treason toward the king. In this message there is no rebuttal that what Amos is saying is untrue, only a warning to Jeroboam that Amos is saying that Jeroboam will be punished. Amaziah also tells Amos to go back to Judah with his message. He tells Amos that Bethel is the king’s sanctuary and a temple of the

kingdom. And that is the problem in Israel—the center of worship no longer belongs to the Lord—just as the priest feels his allegiance is to the king not to serving the Lord. We are not given a response from Jeroboam, but Amaziah tries to silence the message of the Lord by sending Amos back to Judah. Amos' response is that he is just a messenger sent by the Lord not a professional religious person. He is committed to speak because the Lord gave him the message. He evidently is not going anywhere else. Amos spoke truth to power. This message of judgment was not well received, repentance did not follow. Speaking truth to power has never been a popular route. In our gospel passage from Mark, we have another example of someone who spoke an unwelcome message to the king. In each of the synoptic gospels, the descriptions of John the Baptist vary to a degree. They all report that John preached a message of repentance, and that many of the people heard this message and came to him expressing repentance. At the beginning of Matthew, John rages at the Pharisees and Sadducees, religious leaders, who come to him. John calls them out for their hypocrisy. In Luke, we are given John's answer for what constitutes repentance—changing your life by sharing what you have with those who have less. Mark also reports on these things, but in a much briefer manner. Yet when we come to our passage this morning concerning the death of John the Baptist at Herod's hands, the description is more detailed than in Luke or Matthew. There are few passages from Mark which are used as the basis of movies or other dramatizations, but this description of John's death is the exception—even an opera was written based on it. The details of the scene fit well into a plot of depravity on several levels. Evidently that makes it a good "Biblical Story" to market. Instead of focusing on that banquet I would like to focus on the opening verses. In Matthew and Luke, the report of John the Baptist's death is mentioned in connection with Jesus' growing reputation. John's death has not just happened. It is told as a flashback. According to Mark, Jesus' ministry did not even begin until after John's arrest. What brings the incident into the gospel account is Herod's association of Jesus and the beheaded John the Baptist. In Mark, the question about recognizing Jesus' identity is a central theme: Who does or does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The disciples have asked, "Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him?" Those in the synagogue at Nazareth, even as they rejected Jesus, wondered at his wisdom and the authority with which he spoke as well as what they had heard about him. Despite Jesus' injunctions to many he healed to not speak of it, his fame is spreading. As this passage opens, speculations about Jesus' identity is given—including that he represents a reappearance of Elijah or a prophet like those of old. But Herod declares Jesus must be John, whom I beheaded who has been raised." There are many aspects of the banquet scene which could be analyzed for motivation by Herod, by Herod's wife and her daughter. The story itself is a long anecdote within a brief written account of Jesus in which Jesus himself never appears. In fact, even John the Baptist himself never appears. So why is it there? Perhaps it is there to point out what happens to those who speak truth to power. It is a risky business. So the association of John the Baptist is not far off—Jesus is also speaking truth to power. In some ways this flashback becomes a flash forward to the fate awaiting Jesus—death on a cross because of the challenge to those in power. That speaking truth to power is a common thread in both of our readings today. Our society today has many voices claiming to be speaking truth; many of them proclaim to be speaking God's truth. Some only claim to be speaking the truth of the 'kingdom' that is their culture. In this time we need to find our own

vision of a plumb line through which we can view what we build and what we support. The message of scripture from beginning to end promises God's love and mercy. Christ's message and life are a demonstration of just how far God goes in order to redeem and claim us. But although the offer of grace is ever present, there is also a message of accountability represented by the plumb line in Amos' vision. We are beloved children of God who are called to live a certain way—a way where love of the other is second only to the love we hold for the Lord. That is our plumb line: the standard against which we should measure all the words and actions, thoughts and deeds of our lives. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.