

Amos 7: 7-15, Mark 6: 14-29 The Moment of Grace

Amos 7: 7-15

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb-line.’ Then the Lord said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb-line

in the midst of my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by;

the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,

and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,

and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.’

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.” ’ And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.’ Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”

Mark 6: 14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, ‘John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason, these powers are at work in him.’ But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, ‘It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.’ But when Herod heard of it, he said, ‘John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.’

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, ‘Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.’ And he solemnly swore to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.’ She went out and said to her mother, ‘What should I ask for?’ She replied, ‘The head of John the baptizer.’ Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, ‘I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Karl Barth is famously quoted to have said, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both.” (Time Magazine, May 1, 1966.) Many a seminary students and future-preachers have been told some rendition of this quote ever since.

Who is Karl Barth? He was a Swiss Protestant theologian who articulated a Reformed expression of Christian faith. He did this by writing a 14 volume, 6 million (German) word theological masterpiece called “Church Dogmatics,” which took him 35 years and he still wasn’t done when he died in 1968. But he also knew we do not live in the Biblical times nor in the world of theological ideas but in real time in a real world. And Barth lived in the tumultuous time of Europe spanning 2 world wars and witnessed the rise and fall of Nazi Germany.

These days, he would have said “Take your Bible, and open your online news App, and read them both.” And many preachers were doing just that last night, as the news of the assassination attempt on the former President Trump came streaming in. But there is actually more to Barth’s quote about reading both the Bible and the newspaper. He continued on to say, “BUT interpret newspapers from your Bible.” In other words, see the world through the lens of God’s Word, and not God’s Word through the lens of the world.

The Bible is always our departure point for discerning God’s desire for us and the world, and we are not to limit God’s vision for us by what we actually see going on in the world. Lest we despair.

For longer than I care to remember, the political discourse in the “newspaper” has become increasingly callous, and the political tension was mounting to a point that felt, to me, unsustainable, and then, what happened last night was the most recent case in a series of political violence in recent years.

If you’re getting nervous that I’m going to get “political” in my sermon, don’t worry; I don’t have to, because the Bible passages assigned for this morning is plenty political. You heard it. In the words of the public theologian and author Diana Butler Bass, the Gospel passage is “about a corrupt ruler, and his even more corrupt family, retribution against one’s critics, and a political murder.” The Hebrew Scripture reading from the book of Amos is about the kingdom sharply divided, and how a religious leader in the north switched allegiance from God to a king.

It may be tempting to read our reality into these stories, but if we are follow to Barth’s advice to “interpret the Newspaper from the Bible,” we would be learning from these stories where we may have gone astray from God’s way, seeing our own brokenness in the flaws of

those characters. And at the same time, we mine these Biblical stories for the good news hidden in the reality of evil, seeing the character of God, who is still the same today, illuminated in the stories, so that we may be attuned for the moments of grace when they happen in our lives, in real time, in the real, broken world.

In the story of Amos, we have a situation in the kingdom of Israel. This was a time the kingdom was split into two, the northern kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah. At the time of the story, the kingdom of Israel was doing very well, enjoying unprecedented wealth, power, and prestige. But, in God's eye, it was clear those worldly gains were products of misdeeds and injustice and not the fruits of living according to God's will. By God's measure, when God put a plumb line in the midst of the people of Israel, they came up short. They may be prosperous and all, but they were not measuring up to God's expectations.

So, what did God do? God took Amos from the southern kingdom who was tending the flocks and taking care of sycamore trees, a fruit yielding tree, and send him to the northern kingdom to deliver God's Word to that God is not pleased with them. Amos had to "cross the aisle" and reach out, so to speak, to obey what God commanded. God is like that, defying human construct of divisions to reach whom God wants to reach. That's grace.

And who confronts Amos? Amaziah, a priest of the most important shrine in the northern kingdom at Bethel. Amaziah, a religious leader, makes a political move to turn the king against Amos who came bearing God's judgment upon Israel. Then Amaziah tells Amos to go back to where he'd come from, the land of Judah, and make living being a prophet there. He's basically telling Amos to "stay in his lane" because Amaziah is making a living, perhaps making a killing, being a prophet at this temple in Bethel, and he means to protect his position.

It's ironic that Amaziah calls Bethel the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom, leaving God completely out of it, yet he is the priest. Bethel is where their ancestor Jacob encountered and wrestled with angels. Jacob called the place Bethel, saying "surely God is in this place." Amaziah had politically sold out, switching his allegiance from God to the king. A sad story, really. Where is the good news? Where is the grace?

Amos responds to Amaziah saying, "I'm no professional prophet. I am a shepherd taking care of flocks on the other side of the kingdom and God took me from following my flock and sent me to you." I guess Jesus was not the first shepherd God sent after the lost sheep. God is

like that, sending shepherds and prophets to any that go astray. God is still like that, and that's grace, too.

Fast-forward hundreds of years, still over 2 thousand years ago from our time to another situation. In a flashback of a scene, we meet a tragically conflicted King Herod. Jesus powerful ministry was gaining momentum and drawing more and more attention, and the word reached this king, the grandson of Herod the Great who, according to Matthew's Gospel tried to nip in the bud the threat to his kingdom, by killing all male boys under the age of two.

Jesus appearance in power brings him back to another time and situation where the politically insecure king made a choice against his deeper knowing and killed a man from God. There were different speculations as to who Jesus was, and some at the court was saying "These powers were at work with Jesus because John the Baptist had been raised from the dead." That was also Herod's gut feeling, because, while he didn't yet know Jesus and only had heard about his ministry, he recognized the nature of that power, guiding, correcting, strangely healing while calling out what is false and against God's will and prompting one to realign one's way with God's.

Why, that's what John had done for him. In a way perhaps Herod himself didn't recognize, John was like a shepherd, making a good use of his shepherd's staff in not so gentle a manner to correct Herod, making him remember, even ever so faintly, that there was God who cared for goodness in him to grow. That was a moment of grace for Herod. And, oh, what did he do with it? Herod feared John but he still liked to listen to him, so he made a political prisoner of him.

He didn't like it; he didn't like that John's popularity was becoming a threat to his political power, and he didn't like that John called out how he took his brother's wife was against the Law of Moses. So, when an occasion arose and his ill-acquired wife schemed to kill John, trapping Herod in the process in the moral dilemma of his life, he sadly refused to accept the moment of grace. He "deeply grieved," the Bible says, but still chose the politically expedient path. Rejecting Grace, he would live in anxiety, which he was able to suppress until Jesus appeared to remind him. We know he would again fail to accept the moment of grace with Jesus, letting Pontius Pilate to crucify him. And then, God did raise Jesus, and the risen Christ walks with us, offering grace at every turn even in the reality of our messy, political world. Thanks be to God.