

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

7 Pentecost, Proper 10, July 11, 2021

READINGS:

Amos 7:7-15

Psalms 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Preaching is a very interesting enterprise, at least for the preacher, and hopefully for those who hear the sermon. Sometimes I look at the lessons for a Sunday, and I know right away what I should say about them. Sometimes I puzzle and pray and look at my preaching resources for quite a while figuring out just what God wants me to say about them. Today is one of those "puzzle and pray" Sundays!

In today's readings, we hear about two prophets and a promise. Let's see where that takes us!

Amos and John are two very different prophets, and two very different people.

Amos's Old Testament book is the oldest of the prophetic books in the Bible, written somewhere in the time between 760-755 B.C. It was a time of relative peace and prosperity, at least for the well-to-do, but also a time of neglect of God's laws.

Amos lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, in Tekoa, about twelve miles south of Jerusalem. But, he traveled to the northern kingdom of Israel to deliver his messages, often at the important shrine of Beth-El. In fact, that is where we encounter him today, as he interprets his vision of a wall and a plumb line as a judgment on Israel, and is told by the priest Amaziah to go away and earn his living as a prophet somewhere else, before he gets everyone into trouble with King Jeroboam.

Amos responds to Amaziah in a way that tells us he is no professional prophet, but a man speaking in obedience to a divine vocation. "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son," he tells Amaziah, "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.'"

Amos had a message for Israel, and it was not one the leaders and the wealthy wanted to hear. He spoke against the increased disparity between the very wealthy and the very poor, and for justice in society. He stressed God's omnipotence, and the coming of divine judgment for Israel if they did not return to just dealings with others and to following God's laws.

Though he was not wealthy, Amos clearly was able to leave his trees and his flocks in someone else's care while on his prophetic journeys, and to return home when he had delivered his message. His career as a prophet was short, and he probably went back to work on his farm when it ended.

By the way, I got curious about what exactly a "dresser of sycamore trees" did in Amos's time. I was fascinated to find out that the trees in question are actually a species of fig tree, the Sycamore Fig or Mulberry Fig, which has been cultivated for thousands of years in Egypt and the Middle East. Roman soldier and author Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History Book Thirteen - Trees*, written in the first century A.D., says this about these fig trees:

"Egypt has many varieties of trees not found elsewhere - first and foremost the fig, which for this reason, is called the Egyptian fig. Its leaves resemble those of the mulberry in size and appearance. The fig produces its fruit not on branches but on the trunk itself, and the Egyptian variety is exceptionally sweet and seedless. The tree's yield is extremely prolific, but only when iron hooks are used to make incisions in the fruit, which otherwise will not ripen. When this is done the fruit is picked three days later, while another fig forms beneath it; the tree thus has seven crops of very juicy figs in a single summer."

So a "dresser" of sycamores made incisions in the fruit, which brought it to ripeness. Sycamore Fig fruits are still "nicked with a knife" in Egypt today ripen them.

John, called the Baptizer, was the last of the Old Testament style prophets. He never wrote a book, but we learn about him in all four of the Gospel accounts. His time was a turbulent time of rule by outsiders and of great concern by the leaders in Jerusalem for any activities that might excite the occupying Romans.

John was Jesus' cousin, and his father was a member of the Jewish priesthood. Luke tells us that John recognized Jesus as the Son of God before either was born. His family lived not far from Jerusalem, and his father served with other priests in rotation at the temple there. So, it is not too big a surprise to find the adult John appearing in the desert of Judah in a prophetic role, announcing Christ's kingdom as "A voice crying in the wilderness."

John dressed like the prophet Elijah in camel's hair and a leather belt. Like many Old Testament prophets, he lived frugally, sometimes off the land, with foods like locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom, and issued a strong invitation to baptism

with water to show repentance for sin. Jesus himself came to him for baptism in the river Jordan as a beginning for his own ministry.

Like Amos, John had a message for the people of Israel. Like Amos's message, it was not one the leadership of his time wanted to hear. "Prepare the way of the Lord," thundered John. Repent and be baptized! Change the way you do things! Be generous to the poor. Stop cheating. Stop oppressing other people. The Messiah is coming as a judge! And people came out to him in large numbers to be baptized.

In today's reading, John the prophet is already dead. He had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas for publicly rebuking Herod's adulterous marriage to his brother's wife Herodias, and then executed to fulfill a pledge to Herodias' daughter made during Herod's birthday banquet.

Amos and John are two very different prophets, one a professional from a priestly family, and one a farmer of delicious figs. But, they do have important things in common. Neither has an easy time proclaiming the message God has given him. Amos gets tossed out of his preaching location, and John is killed while in prison. And check out the messages! Both are about life changes, justice, generosity, opposition to oppression, and following God's law.

Long ago, I heard a story about a priest who gave a really great sermon in his parish. His parishioners loved it, and they were very loud in their praise when he greeted them after the service. They were surprised, however, when the following Sunday he preached the same sermon again, and even more surprised to hear it a third time the Sunday after that! Finally, the warden approached the priest, and asked the question that was on everyone's mind - why the same sermon three weeks in a row? "That shouldn't surprise you," the priest told him. "I will preach you a new sermon when you do what I told you to do in the last one!"

I think that is where these two prophets touch us across all the centuries between their lives and ours. The messages of Amos and John remind us about things that still need work now, here at the corner of Newton and Nellis, in the year of Our Lord 2021! Do we still have a very large gap between very rich and very poor? Yes. Are we always generous to our neighbors? No. Is there justice in our society for everybody, all the time? Not yet. Do we perfectly follow our Lord's commandment to love God with everything we are and have, and our neighbor as much as we love ourselves? Well, not always.

But, people of God, don't be discouraged! We are not perfect yet! Remember that promise I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon? This is where that promise comes in! Saint Paul tells us in our reading from his letter to the church in Ephesus that God has chosen us - US - to be blessed with every spiritual blessing, and to be holy and without blemish before him. We are not perfect now, but we are redeemed. The Lord Jesus has bought us with a price. God's grace is working in our lives, like leaven in bread, helping us to change, little by little, into the people he means us to be.

So listen to Amos and to John. Don't stay out of the struggle for a better world, thinking you are not "important" enough to make a difference! Just think about the old hymn "Make Me A Blessing." Make some changes. Do some small thing for a neighbor. Keep up with your prayer life. Be generous. Support justice for everyone. Be a blessing "to someone today," and remember that God's blessings to us are promised and sure!

Just keep working on it, bit by bit, and I really do promise you won't have to hear the same sermon from me again the next time it's my turn to preach!

Amen.