

7th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 7.12.15

Scripture: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19

Mark 6:14-29

Walls that aren't straight don't stand as walls for long. Walls that don't square will collapse under the weight of the building. All walls eventually fall, of course; but ones that weren't vertically true in the first place fall that much sooner.

The standard for measuring a wall is a plumb line.

The word Amos used in his not-prophecy (for he wasn't a prophet, nor was he the son of a prophet, but was a herdsman) isn't used anywhere else in scripture. The word is most often rendered in English "plumb line." Scholars, though, question whether this is what was meant. Many doubt Amos was speaking here of a plumb line; many doubt that what the Lord showed him was a plumb line. But they don't know what he was talking about, what he was shown; and "plumb line" makes sense in this context. So, though one scholar said, "...preachers will do well to look beyond the obvious choice to focus on the symbol of the plumb line and explore other aspects of today's texts," I'm going to focus on the obvious choice, that plumb line, of which Amos may or not have spoken.

I won't only focus on that though. I'll also focus on this, Herod. *King Herod*.

It was a provocative thing for the gospel writer to call him "King Herod." After all, he wasn't a king, he was a tetrarch, though he wanted to be a king, or at least to be called one. When he would later make this appeal to the emperor, though—that he be considered a king, so impertinent a request—Caesar Gaius Caligula had him and his wife Herodias banished to Gaul for the rest of their lives.

It was therefore not just provocative but also ironic that our gospel writer called him a king. He wasn't one. He wanted to be one. He would eventually be humiliated in his ambition to become one, so now, in calling him one, it was a term of sneaky derision. It pointed all the more to the lack of power this supposedly powerful man had, doing a girl's bidding in beheading John the Baptizer, which was actually the last thing he probably wanted to do.

After all, he enjoyed John the Baptizer. Though he was often perplexed by what John had to say, nonetheless Herod "liked to listen to him."

Herodias, however, wasn't so won over.

This is one of the longer pericopes in Mark's gospel—Mark who is masterful with the condensed and the fast moving. Stories that take ten verses in Matthew or Luke's telling, and twenty in John's telling, Mark can crystalize into two or three. Yet here he goes on at some length—though it's all in backstory, all flashback. Plus, it has nothing to do with Jesus, who prior to now has been the principal agent. In every event, encounter, and occurrence in Mark's narrative, Jesus was the one to act. Really, Jesus is everything according to Mark, but suddenly he matters apparently not at all.

This is what does matter. John the Baptizer had been imprisoned in a nearby dungeon—nearby such that Herod could still access him. He had been imprisoned because he kept declaring Herod's marriage to Herodias unlawful for the fact that Herodias had been married to Herod's brother, Philip, who was yet alive. If Philip had died, it would be one thing: then it would have been fitting, expected even, for Herod to take in his now deceased brother's wife. But his brother wasn't deceased. Herod simply took his wife for himself.

But that's not all. Already married, Herod had also banished his first wife back to her where she'd come from—back to the Nabataeans, a people settled into a string of oases from southern Jordan to northern Arabia, from the Euphrates to the Red Sea. On these oases the people farmed the land, and connecting them were loosely defined trade routes. Predictably, Herod's returning one of their women in favor of his brother's wife offended them and they subsequently made war with Herod and defeated him roundly, while also making the flow of trade sclerotic.

In sum, Herod was a reckless fool, a person incapable of exercising self-restraint even when war against his people was a possible consequence for his impulsivity.

As for Herodias, it's easy to imagine her an ambitious woman, someone who was all too pleased to sleep her way to the top. But, you know, maybe she wasn't. Maybe she had loved Philip, and had wanted to be *his* wife. Maybe he was a good man, at least relative to his brother, and a good husband. Maybe she hadn't meant to

attract the attention of Herod, and wasn't at all happy when she had. But how do you say no to a king, even one who isn't actually a king?

Okay, maybe she was happy to be married to such power—and this is why she had a grudge against John the baptizer's: she didn't want to hear about how what she and Herod were doing was unlawful.

But maybe she was filled with dread at the idea of being Herod's wife—and this is why she had a grudge against John the baptizer: she just wanted to lay low and get by, along with her daughter.

You know, if the latter was the case—that Herodias was not too happy with her new marriage to Herod—then I imagine, for Herodias, seeing her husband watch her daughter dance for his party guests was especially disturbing. If he was indeed predatory and impulsive, I imagine, for Herodias, watching him watch her daughter was particularly distressing.

Having Salome ask for John's head on a platter, then, would come at the problem from two angles. It would punish John the baptizer for not simply letting well enough alone, and it would punish Herod, who, though often perplexed at what John had to say, liked to listen to him anyway—would punish him for being a creep and a lecher, a “king” unworthy of his power.

Well, the “king” was deeply grieved at this, at having to behead his favorite political prisoner, John; but he couldn't *not* do it. He'd given his word and now he had to make good on it. But this simply demonstrates once again his foolishness. Handing his power over to the whim, or the calculation, of a girl who was herself twisting in a dynamic of deceit and exploitation is a ridiculous thing for a king to do.

The whole situation, it should be said, is stupid and disgusting. Really, the only moment of dignity in the entire scenario is in the stated fact of John's disciples coming to collect the headless body of their teacher. To lay it in a tomb, to give him a proper burial even if his death was a wanton one (or *especially* since his death was a wanton one): this detail, played out by John's disciples, is the only moment of humanity in an otherwise sick series of events.

As for good news (for isn't that at least in part why we come to church?), we'd need to consider this story in the light of the story that follows it, remembering when

Jesus hosted a very different sort of dinner gathering, in the gloaming of the evening on a mountaintop, where 5,000 people, now hungry after a day of following him, came together and sat down and were filled of five loaves of bread and two fish. A tale of two dinner parties, I've called it, one a playing out of what the world has to offer and the other a promise of what God has in mind and what the Holy Spirit makes possible in both the next world and in this one. The future-perfect promise shines its light back onto the present-day reality, and in such light what's "real" can nearly be felt to be falling away.

Falling away: for its not being true, for its not being right in its angles and seams, the unbending insistence of such constructed realities and currencies fall away, simply fall away.

It might not seem so in the story as we it heard today. Standing on its own, apart from the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, it might not seem so because, as a flashback, everything this reading recounts is already complete. John had already been arrested, imprisoned, beheaded, by the time Herod is said to have heard about Jesus' disciples, sent out and healing and exorcising and teaching in Jesus' name. All of this—the dinner party, the dancing, the meaningless act of murder—are complete by the time Herod is said to have supposed, along with many others, that Jesus wasn't Elijah come again, or one of the prophets, but was John the Baptizer, whom he'd beheaded and had now been raised.

I can't imagine this "resurrection" came as good news to Herod.

It's worth noticing that Herod wasn't exactly wrong. Scholar Clifton Black calls out all the ways in which John's story would become Jesus' story. "Herod foreshadows Pilate in the same way that John presages Jesus," he writes. "The two prefects are nominally in charge. Like Herod, Pilate is [said to be] 'amazed' by circumstances surrounding an innocent prisoner, swept up in events that fast spin out of his control, and unable to back down after being publicly outmaneuvered. Like John, Jesus is passive in his final hours, faces with integrity his moment of truth, and is executed by hideous capital punishment, dying to placate those whom he offends. Finally, John's disciples give their teacher a proper burial..." just as the women who came to the tomb had planned to do that first Easter morning.

But wasn't that John's role in life, and in the good news of Jesus Christ and the history of the salvation of all creation that God has in mind? To be a herald and a way-maker, John would go ahead of Jesus like a plough that turns the soil so seeds might better grow—something eternal and sustaining growing up where so much of human making and enforcing will eventually fall down.

When Amos spoke (or perhaps didn't speak) of a plumb line, it came as the third of three visions imagining the destruction of Israel. Prophesying in the eighth century before Christ, it wasn't an outside force that threatened the nation and that provoked the prophet to speak: neither Babylonia nor Assyria were yet a threat. No, the problem that the prophet spoke to was an internal one: Israel and Judah weren't living as the conscientious united kingdom they were gathered to be. Religiously arrogant but socially unjust, Israel and Judah were neglecting the poor in their midst, denying them their rights.

Here is what the Lord had to reveal in this regard.

First, the Lord showed Amos locusts, forming at the time when the latter growth began to sprout. The implicit threat was that the Lord would then send actual locusts to bring low this now unjust nation. But Amos begged the Lord not to. "It shall not be," said the Lord.

Second, the Lord showed Amos a shower of fire that the Lord would send to devour the land. The implicit threat was that the Lord would do this as punishment. But Amos begged the Lord not to. "This also shall not be," said the Lord.

Third, the Lord showed Amos a plumb line. A plumb line—this which has no power to destroy or to lay waste, this which only gauges and gives witness to what is. A plumb line simply evaluates, measures, judges the quality of what's been built. And why would punishment be necessary, anyway, when whatever is untrue will fall on its own? The untruth is penalty enough. The consequence of shoddy, imbalanced construction is its own punishment.

God as judge is, I realize, a tough sell for some. It makes God sound harsh; it makes God sound stern, scary. Here's why it doesn't for me.

When Jesse was being sued for malpractice by the mother of a patient who committed suicide, the plaintiff on the stand was irrational, crazed, which I don't

mean as a diagnosis but as a description. She couldn't simply answer a question. Everything she said injected confusion and suspicion into the proceedings. Jesse's lawyer couldn't get clear answers out of her; her own lawyer hardly could either, and she trusted him.

Finally, after an hour or so of circular logic, defensive nonsense, and accusatory bitterness, the judge spoke up, silencing everyone else. From on high, he told her simply to answer questions "yes" or "no." Not to say any more than necessary, not to speak out of the bounds of the trial and its framework, she was to answer slowly and sparely, which, in telling her, he sounded kind and compassionate but also clear and strict. He wasn't taking sides, he was just trying to make the proceedings fair for all involved.

His speaking up brought calm to the room. As I could sense it, the whole room was emptied of the rising anxiety that had claimed us all.

That's what a judge can do—can recognize what's going on, can correct the course of things, and can make way for a fair hearing for everyone involved. Then things are revealed for what they really are—what's true stands as true while what's crooked or compromised will continue in its own downfall.

There's a progress here. It's the progress of all of scripture; it's the progress of all of humanity—this micro-progress in these three visions and verses from three millennia ago. From a God who intends punishment to a God who grants freedom, from a people who take their God as punitive to a people who take their God as granting of free choice and allowing for consequence, from a theology that I simply can't believe (that God doles out just desserts, to the good giving reward and to the bad giving punishment—for, if that's true, what re to make of the fact that God's anointed was crucified?) to a theology that, not only can I believe but one that moves me to live and act in faith and hope (that God means for truth that sustains itself and justice that is balance, and that God gives what we need so to judge our own work): there's a progression here.

Herod's terror-state will fall. Pilate's terror-state will fall. Systems of justice that don't actually do justice will fall—and we can resist and withstand because God means for justice. Social structures and economies that oppress and exploit will fall—

and we can participate in their falling if at least by not propping them up. All things not of God will fall, and all in the world will be better off for it.

The readings this week point to moments of terror amidst systems of terror; and what hope they speak to is slow-hope, a grand arc toward justice that holds some promise for today, for this moment—some promise, though perhaps a dim and distant one. To be sure, if you're the one suffering such terror amidst such terror, the good news as promised this morning could well feel far off, even irrelevant. But if you're not the one suffering this morning, right now, then you're the one implicated into such active resistance. If you're somehow privileged by the systems that will eventually fall, then you're being called to witness and to act.

The kingdom is coming—which means it's here and it's not yet here. In the coming of true justice, of active mercy, or victorious love, or persistent forgiveness, that realm of glimmering promise is both here and not yet here. Those who need it most are the ones whose waiting is most active. Those who need it least—least pressingly, least pantingly—which is to say those who are also blessed in the realms of this world, which is to say the likes of us, are charged to work that the coming might be now. If you have slack in your system, give of it to others. If you have blessing to spare, let it out to abound. The need is out there, and the promise of grace upon grace poured out will not fail. Live as if this were true, and it will be true. Love as if God were real, and God will be real.

We don't need to make it happen; it will happen on its own. But can you imagine a better way to live than to be a part of making it happen? I can't.

Thanks be to God.