

Pentecost 7, July 11, 2021 (Mk 6:14-29; Amos 7:7-15; Ps 85:8-13; Eph 1:3-14)

Today's texts speak about what it means to be a faithful servant of God. In the first reading, Amos appears as a reluctant prophet speaking God's truth to a chief priest and king who don't want to hear it.

Amos was sent to call Israel back to the way of the Lord. King Jeroboam and the ruling class had created their comfortable society at the cost of the many poor people of the land, who were suffering under financial and legal burdens.

God loved Israel, his chosen people! He had built them up according to his own standards and expected them to be true to those standards. He looked for obedience but found only an ever-growing disparity between *cruel wealth* and *rampant poverty*. So God stood beside Amos with a plumb line, showing him how he would judge the uprightness of Israel's ruling class.

I will never again pass them by, he proclaimed, meaning *they won't get away with this injustice again*. Earlier in chapter seven God had twice told Amos of his plan to destroy the Israelites. First it was going to be by swarms of locusts, and then by fire.

Both times, Amos protested God's harsh judgment, crying out, **How can Jacob—Israel—survive? He is so small**. Both times God relented. So we see that a prophet can actually speak the truth to *God himself*, without fear. You may remember that Abraham and Moses did the same, back in Genesis and Exodus.

King Jeroboam and his chief priest Amaziah (a false prophet) wanted to ban Amos from the land. **Go away!** Amaziah told him. **We don't want your message here! Go home and prophesy in your own country—but stay away from us!**

Poor Amos! He didn't want to be there in the first place! **I'm not a prophet**, he told Amaziah; **there aren't any prophets in my family. I'm a herdsman and a farmer! That's what I've always done, and that's what I wish I could be doing right now. But the Lord took me from following the flock. The Lord said to me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel.** So Amos, a faithful servant of God, had no choice.

Today's gospel tells the story of another prophet. John the Baptist, unlike Amos, knew from little on that he'd be a prophet for God. John grew up listening to God, and now he's dead, beheaded by a ruler who didn't want to hear the truth he spoke for God.

The common theme is clear: *a prophet is not a popular person and may well end up outcast, or even dead!* Today's gospel verses directly follow last week's text about Jesus sending the disciples out two by two, and that makes it even more sobering. Because it's not only the *biblical* prophets who are called to speak God's truth to the world—anyone who wants to be a faithful servant of God today had better listen up!

Be honest. Do you want to hear how sinful you are when you come to church? It's much more comfortable to greet friends, sing nice songs, and hear a sermon about love and peace and joy.

We don't want to confront our own sinfulness, the ways in which we're *not* being faithful disciples who proclaim the saving love of Jesus to others. But if we don't repent, and grow, we aren't fulfilling our calling as baptized children of God, and we're short-changing ourselves.

One of my devotional readings for this week's texts is by Episcopal Priest Rosalind Hughes: *Unless we can confess our sin to ourselves—to say nothing of God—how can we experience forgiveness? Unless we are willing to receive the healing grace of God for our own hurts and injuries, we will be unlikely to share God's healing grace with anybody else. What then will our legacy be?* (*Disciplines*, 2021, p. 229)

Mark places the story of John the Baptist in the context of *discipleship*. He's calling us to a deeper understanding and practice of our faith. Faith is more than knowing *about* Jesus. Faith is *knowing* Jesus who, like John, was killed because he preached, taught, and lived a truth most people didn't want to hear, perceive, or receive.

We live in a time of ethical, political, and religious confusion. The United States is a nation at war with itself. Many Christians, even many *Lutherans*, are polarized in their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

Do our readings today give you any insight as to what God's faithful followers are called to do? King Jeroboam in the time of Amos and King Herod in the time of Jesus were both breaking God's laws of justice and righteousness. The prophets who spoke out against them, Amos and John, were punished for their boldness.

Jesus, too, bluntly and publicly criticized the religious and political rulers of his day, earning first the distrust and then the hatred of the Jewish and Roman leaders. He **suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.** Those who had persecuted him thought that would be the end of it.

But God, in his infinite wisdom, had other plans! **On the third day God raised Jesus from the dead, and he ascended into heaven, where he sits at the right hand of God.** The Holy Spirit was then sent to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify us—the Church, the body of Christ—so we can be God’s servants in the world today.

My colleague in ministry Brian Stoffregen relates this story: There were two brothers in Georgia during the 1950’s. Both were Christians and attended church regularly. One of the brothers disagreed with the dominant culture of the day and decided to participate in the formation of a multi-ethnic community. The other worked as an attorney for a large law firm.

Social pressures forced the integrated community into court proceedings, and the one brother asked his attorney brother to help them with the legal work. The attorney refused, saying he could lose his job by doing that.

The other brother reminded the attorney that he was a Christian. The lawyer responded, “I’ll follow Jesus to his cross, but it’s *his* cross. I have no need to be crucified.” The brother with a social conscience replied, “Then you’re an *admirer* of Jesus, but not his disciple.”

Listen again to part of the reading from Ephesians: **The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing. . . . In him we have the forgiveness of our sins, according to his grace that he lavished on us. . . . In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, so that we might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. . . .**

Think back to these words from the prophet Amos. God was determined to do away with the Israelites because their leaders continued to rule with arrogant injustice. Then Amos spoke God's truth, God's covenant promise of love and forgiveness, to *God*: **How can Jacob—Israel—survive? He is so small! And the Lord relented concerning this decision to destroy his chosen people.** In the end, God couldn't bear to do go through with it.

Six centuries later, God once again realized he couldn't allow his chosen people to be annihilated, because **God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone* who believed in him—or *wanted* to believe—should not *perish*, but have everlasting life.**

This is the God who calls us to *live for the praise of hi's glory*. God has given us his approval and love, his power and presence, so that we can live as faithful servants of Jesus!

Today's lessons are a plumb line for our own righteousness, keeping us mindful of all that God *has done, is doing, and promises still to do* for us—so that we, in joy and thanksgiving, can live according to God's gracious will. Do you *follow Jesus*? or do you just *admire* him? Choose well!

Thanks be to God!