

“Things we need to hear”

July 12, 2009

Text: *Amos 7:7-9, Mark 6:14-29*

I.

Both of our readings this morning serve as a powerful reminder that at times—no matter who we are—there are things we need to hear about ourselves. Obviously, there are gradations of human behaviors, behaviors where we—to whatever extent—fall short of the glory of God.

In our reading from the book of **Amos**, the prophet, a humble herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees from the South (from Judah) is called by God to prophesy (to be God’s messenger) in the north where, one day, in a vision Amos sees God standing beside a wall built with a *plumb-line*, with an actual *plumb-line* in his hand.

The Lord says to Amos, *what do you see?* Immediately, Amos replies, *A plumb-line*. God then says to him:

See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel ... and God goes on to say how Israel shall be laid to waste and how God will rise up against Israel’s king with the sword.

Amos’ historical period was around 740 BCE, a time of almost unequalled prosperity in Israel, but a time, too, of pronounced decadence and sin.

In the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament prophets, a *plumb-line* is like a judgment or a test to see if we measure up to God’s covenants and commandments. Clearly, Israel does not. The plumb-line of God nudges us always towards God’s purposes and towards higher spiritual ground—that we might lead upright and moral lives.

II.

In this story of treachery from Mark’s gospel—from the reading I just shared—we’re introduced, again, to the dark world of King Herod. This is **Herod Antipas** who, it turns out, is actually not a king (Mark is apparently in error on this) ... and in fact, who ends up, some six to eight years later, being banished by the Emperor Caligula for some questionable political maneuvers.

Herod, as the story tells us, fumbles into a situation—at his birthday party, no less—where he agrees to give his wife, Herodias, the head of *John the Baptist* on a platter.

What an evil and gruesome notion. Of course this all happens as a result of Herod’s low moral character when, in spite of the reprimands of John the Baptist, Herod marries his

brother Philip's wife Herodias (Philip and Herodias are still legally married). Herodias is herself a woman of considerable ambition and self-centered designs. And as the story informs us, she bears a deep grudge against John over his condemnations.

However, about John the Baptist, Herod is curiously conflicted.

- It turns out that Herod, knowing John to be a righteous and holy man, has a murmuring of a conscience. At this point, he would almost seem to be a prospect for conversion.
- In any event, Herod ends up being a protective shield against Herodias' evil designs to have John put to death.

As contradictory as it may seem, Herod discovers he likes listening to John. Imagine that! What could that be about?

Here is John the Baptist—holy man, man of God—bringing God's judgment on Herod again and again. Why doesn't Herod just have John put to death? Why does he protect him? Is there something in Herod that is drawn to a high moral standard?

Probably not. However, it's likely that Herod has some belief in God ... and, therefore, given the theological bent of his time, he might well have a sense of *the fear of the Lord*. Clearly, there's something going on in his mind and spirit about God and the *holy*. Most likely—at the least—John makes him uneasy about final reckonings.

III.

The words that leap out at me in this story are the second part of verse 20:

When he heard him (John), he was greatly perplexed; yet (get this) he liked listening to him.

Although we don't want to make too much of this because Herod is a devious sort—still—aren't we, too, sometimes like Herod? Isn't there something in us that likes listening to voices that we know call us to a higher standard, to a higher moral purpose, even though our lives, at the moment, may not reflect these standards or purposes?

Is there something in Herod that, truly, aspires to be more like John? The text mentions that Herod knows John to be a *righteous and holy man*.

My guess is that Herod, indeed, does want to be more like John; but—tragically—no where nearly enough. At the end of the day, the murmurings of guilt in Herod's spirit ... that might move him to repent and embrace a God-fearing and virtuous life ... yield way too easily to greed, self-interest, and the trappings of power.

Being evil or being immersed in sinful behavior just doesn't bother Herod enough. He's okay with it, probably to the point where—from his point of view—it's not even sinful. It's just him being himself, being the king (the tetrarch, really), wielding power as he wishes.

IV.

Morally lapsing behavior can easily trickle into the lives of any of us if we're not careful, if there's not a *plumb line* from time to time (like the prophet Amos spoke of) to keep us on track. Such behaviors creep into our lives because we allow them in by the choices we make.

- Addictions ... extra-marital affairs ... whatever other excesses of the spirit ...
- They all have their beginnings at some moment in time. Something triggers in our spirit ...

As the Governor of South Carolina, for example, sunk deeper into the illusions and fantasies of his affair with his Argentine lover, the moral darkness of his behavior probably didn't even occur to him. Like Herod, he did it because *he could* ... until he suddenly *couldn't*, once the news leaked out and reality slammed him in into a hasty confession.

Sadly, what he needed was a wake-up call *plumb line* test before his initial fantasies and flirtations mutated into actual behaviors.

Part of what happens in these moral lapses is people lose sight of their moral center. Through a combination of power and sheer temptation, they drift. And once they cross the line, they find themselves, every day, losing sight—more and more—of their moral lapse. To the point where, soon, it all becomes part of their life routine. Until they get caught.

Very seldom, it seems, do these moral lapses stop on their own, when one of the participants *comes to their senses*. Unfortunately, the time to *come to our senses* is before, when the temptations begin to stir too forcefully in the spirit.

There are **things we need to hear**, friends, all the time, to keep us on track ... to remind us of who we are. The vision of our faith is always the vision of a higher standard. The voice of our faith is always the voice of a higher moral calling.

Herod, too, sensed the higher standard ... and to a limited extent, it appealed to him, but—again—nowhere nearly enough. Again, no doubt he wondered about God and faith and matters of life and death, but ultimately, they quickly gave way to the tug of his life-style which swirled around self-interest and power.

V.

Always, in our lives, there are **things we need to hear**—about ourselves, our community, our nation, our whole human context. That’s the only way we can sort stuff out to where we can grow and evolve.

There are **things we need to hear**. Why? Because, easily, we forget. We lose sight of the BIG PICTURE, the picture that includes everyone—our spouse and children, our parents and grandparents, even our extended family—and not just us and our own immediate gratification impulses.

We need to hear about our temptations to greed and pride ... our temptations to apathy and indifference. Because, at our best, we’re better than that.

- Always, God calls us to a higher purpose ... a purpose where love and kindness and generosity of spirit win the day
- To a higher purpose where patience and tolerance, courage, forbearance and forgiveness sway our words and deeds.

There are **things we need to hear** so we can act on them ... do them ... become better persons ... make a difference.

The thing to remember about Herod is that, ultimately, his life ended in disaster. He may have wielded some impressive power for a time, but he was a total failure. His flawed spirit eventually led him, no doubt due in part to the proddings of Herodias, to get too caught up in ambition and greed. And he was ultimately banned to Gaul, or modern day France, exiled from his land and all that was familiar.

VI.

All the time, friends, there are things we need to hear from our families, and perhaps some of our friends, too. Things we might not even be aware of but things we can do something about and make a difference.

Sometimes there are small things about ourselves that we can change ... things we say or the way we say them ... that can make a difference.

There are things we need to hear, too, from our neighbors, from our community; things that will enable us to be better citizens.

No matter our life-situation, we all need feedback. We need people who will tell us about ourselves—**things we need to hear**—so we can learn and grow and make a better, more loving contribution to our lives and the lives of those whom we love.

The word from the Lord today is a word for each of us ... about us ... about who we are ... the choices we make ... the values we hold. It's a word for us to **hear the things we need to hear**, a word from outside, a word from God, so we can be who and what God needs us to be ... both for God's sake and for ours.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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