

The Outsiders

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Old Testament Lesson: 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.'"

The gospel lesson picks up where last Sunday's story left off. As you remember, Jesus had just sent his disciples out two-by-two to preach repentance and to cast out demons and heal the people.

Gospel Lesson: Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard [about what Jesus' disciples were up to], 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." [Like Amos, perhaps.]

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 [Herod] heard [John], 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."

[Herodias] went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" [Her mother] 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. [The guard] went and beheaded [John] in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.

When [John's] disciples heard about it, they came and took [John's] body, and laid it in a tomb.

A few weeks ago I was preaching about David and Goliath and thinking about some of the giants that are out there stalking the church:

- The giants of declining membership, money, and influence.
- The giants of a culture that is largely indifferent to faith and the church.
- The giants of figuring out how to be church in that context and having the courage and wisdom to reach out to and evangelize a community that is firmly embedded within that culture of indifference.

"Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me," [Goliath said]. "If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants. . . . Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together."

And I asked us all to think of ourselves as David as he carefully picked out five smooth stones from the river bed and challenged Goliath, saying,

"You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. . . . I will strike you down . . . so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel."

And we began to think about the smooth stones that we all carry in our shepherd's bags and how we can use them in the face of these giants to let all the earth know that there is still a God in Israel. And we named those stones and we placed them here in this jar as a kind of covenant: as a witness and a pledge to use our God-given gifts in service to God and to the church and to God's purposes for the church in the world.

To be completely honest with you, I hadn't really thought it out much beyond that. . . . And that is what I love about trying to be open to what God is up to in the world. We can't really plan it, can we? If we want to be open to God's leading and willing to answer when God calls, we have to be free. We have to be unburdened and unconstrained, like the disciples of Jesus when he sent them out two-by-two to preach and to heal. We might even have to be like Amos and like John the Baptist.

Amos and John were outsiders. Neither of them was a member of the established institutions of their days. Amos was a prophet in the time of Jeroboam, the first king of the divided kingdom of Israel after it split off from Judah. Amos went right into the very heart of Israel, to Bethel, the king's sanctuary, a temple of the kingdom too let the kingdom know that it was not measuring up to God's standards of righteousness. When challenged by the priest for speaking against the king, Amos said:

"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.'"

Amos deliberately positioned himself outside the establishment of both kingdom and temple. He spoke for no one but God at the command of God. John the Baptist also positioned himself outside of established institutions. As he is described in the Gospel According to Mark:

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

John, however, was a prophet and a prophet's son. His father was Zechariah, who was serving in the inner sanctum of the temple when he learned that he and Elizabeth would soon conceive a son to prepare the way for the Messiah. John could have spent his life preparing for service in the temple. But he chose instead to leave the establishment behind and become a lone, wild voice proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He, too, let King Herod know that he was not measuring up to God's standards of righteousness. The story says that Herod was greatly perplexed by John, but also loved to listen to him.

(Wouldn't you love to have heard what John had said that left Herod greatly perplexed, yet eager to listen for more? To my mind, that is one of the greatest things we could do: to be out in the community saying and doing things that leave people thinking "What is this church up to? And how can I see and hear and maybe even jump in with them and do more of it?" This is the kind of curiosity that the burning bush piqued in Moses when he said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.")

In many ways, the church these days is an outsider. If we compare the stature and influence of the church today to the stature and influence of the church when our parents were young, we cannot help but see the diminishment. And if, as I suggested a few weeks ago, this is a scary time to be church, it is also an exciting and challenging time. And we need prophetic voices like Amos and John to guide us through it. One of the more interesting actions to have come out of this year's Presbyterian General Assembly meeting is the proposal to include in our *Book of Confessions* Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham City Jail. The GA "commends the [letter] to the church for study, as a resource that provides prophetic witness that inspires, challenges, and educates both church and world."

Martin Luther King Jr. was also called an outsider. His letter was written in response to

Eight white Alabama clergymen [who] published "A Call for Unity" [that] said, in part:

*[W]e are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by **outsiders**. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.*

*We agree rather with certain **local** Negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. ...*

We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement officials in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement officials to remain calm and protect our city from violence.

*We further strongly urge **our own Negro community** to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.*

A copy of [this Call for Unity] was smuggled into jail, and Dr. King wrote the “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” in response.¹

The General Assembly action commends the letter to churches for study because it has much to teach us:

1. That all Americans are impacted by injustice.
2. That insisting that those who labor under crushing poverty should wait and be patient for the convenience of those who are not in such poverty will not resolve poverty. “Wait” too often means “Never,” and justice delayed is justice denied.
3. That Christians are obligated to distinguish between just laws and unjust laws.
4. That there is a better way than either accommodating injustice or advocating violence: Nonviolent resistance.
5. That the worst stumbling blocks to establishing social justice may not be extremists, like members of the Klu Klux Klan, but moderates in white churches who seem content to do little.
6. And that we must always love our enemies, and respect our opponents—as demonstrated in Dr. King’s tone in the letter.²

All of these lessons are crucial to our life together as a church. All of them are certainly worth the time and effort of serious study. And all of them are direct ways that we can find, pick up, and use our own smooth stones for fighting the giants of hunger and poverty, homelessness and hopelessness, fear and violence, division and polarization.

But there is also another lesson we can learn from Dr. King and his Letter from Birmingham City Jail: we can learn how to be more like Amos, John the Baptist, and Dr. King himself. We can learn how to stand with those who suffer and be a strong voice that speaks truth to power. We can learn how to embrace and take advantage of the church’s outsider status to remain free to follow wherever God is leading us. We too can hold up a plumb line in the midst of our communities—in the midst of ourselves—to see where we measure up to God’s expectations for sharing our blessings and where we do not measure up. We too can be a righteous and holy people who speak with a voice that leaves people perplexed maybe, yet eager to listen for more.

What will Butner’s voice be like? I can’t really say—it’s not really my place to say. But I did ask Session last week to tell me “What is Butner Presbyterian known for? What would you like ti to be known for? Two answers stood out: 1) Our Pre-K program: for fifty years we have nurtured and prepared preschoolers for that first day of kindergarten and sent them off with big dreams for big-kid school. 2)”Heart” We are a small church with a big heart: a heart for the kids of this town, a heart for the homeless and hungry, a heart for watering the parched lands of Africa, a heart for community and fostering brotherhood and sisterhood in this community, a hears to extend ourselves far beyond these church walls.

So, yes, by God’s grace and with God’s help, let’s be outsiders too, free like Amos and John to go wherever God leads us, free to speak God’s word of liberation and healing to people who long to be free and whole. Amen.

¹ <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000321>

² <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000321>