

Amos 7:7–15; Psalm 85:8–13;
Ephesians 1:3–14; Mark 6:14–29

I think that any adult who works with or simply deals with children strives to instill in them the importance of being truthful, the importance of being honest. “It’s always best to tell the truth,” is what we tend to say, and that’s what we mean. We want our children, we want those with whom we deal - our coworkers, our neighbors, our family - to be honest, to be forthright, and tell the truth. Yet, telling the truth does not always bring about a good response. That’s what we learn from two of our main characters in our readings today.

So we need to understand this about this guy Amos: He didn’t want to be a prophet; He didn’t think of himself as a prophet; He wasn’t even from around there. We don’t know a whole lot about Amos. In our reading he identifies himself as “herdsman and dresser of trees.” We know from the opening verses of the book that he hails from Tekoa, which is actually about ten miles outside of Jerusalem (that’s in the southern kingdom of Judah). Yet here he is, in the northern kingdom of Israel, outside of their capital, Bethel, which is where not only the king lives, but also is home to the temple to the Lord God Almighty in Israel (remember decades earlier, when Solomon gained the throne, the kingdom formally and permanently split in two - not half, but in two). So, for whatever reason, he’s far from home in Judah, in the related land of Israel. That would be like having your business in Mechanicsburg, yet you’ve gone all the way to Albany, New York to make a sale. And it’s there, in Bethel, that the Lord God Almighty speaks to Amos, and gives him this message, which at this point, is primarily for the king of Israel, a fellow named Jeroboam. And it’s not a good message. It’s not ‘you’re doing a great job, keep up the good work’ kind of a thing. It’s a message of the proverbial dope slap up alongside the head. It’s especially not well received when the one receiving that dope slap appears to be well liked and doing right by the people.

One of the things about Jeroboam II is that, during his reign, he broadened the borders of the Israel, and brought about a time of prosperity. What Amos was railing against was that while those with wealth got wealthier, they did nothing to help those who didn’t have enough to survive. Which, considering that the Law of Moses speaks directly about helping out those in need, widows and orphans and the poor, goes a long way to explaining the WHY part of what Lord God Almighty, and therefore Amos, is upset.

So he uses this whole “plumb line” imagery - you know what a plumb line is, right? It’s a weight on a string that builders, or anybody for that matter, uses to set a straight line, to make certain that a wall is going up correctly, that a foundation is true and square, that things are “level.” So Lord God Almighty is saying to Amos to say to Jeroboam and the overly wealthy: ‘you’re not being true, straight, level, with all those who are in need, those to whom you are called, by your wealth, called by your faith, called by the Law of Moses, to take care of. So Get With The Program.’

But remember how Amos isn't a card carrying prophet? Amaziah, head prophet in Israel, gets upset, and tells him to go home, 'We don't want you around here. We don't like you. We don't want to hear you garbage, and your mother wears army boots' (ok, so I put in that last one, but you get the idea). Amos has been accused of being a false prophet. Do you know how to tell if a prophet is a true prophet of the Lord God Almighty or a false prophet? You can tell, because if what the prophet says comes true, then she is a true prophet. Isn't that a kick in the pants? You have to Wait and See. Amaziah doesn't want to wait and see. He calls Amos false. Amaziah is in a position of power. He can do that. Amos - he's just some guy from the south (and we all have opinions about southerners). And he's getting in trouble - possibly deadly trouble - for speaking the truth.

John the Baptizer, on the other hand, is in an entirely Different kind of trouble. Herod is king (This is NOT the same Herod who was king when Jesus was born. This Herod is *that* Herod's son). THIS Herod has a brother named Philip, who apparently had a REALLY smokin' hot babe for a wife. Herod forces Philip to divorce his wife, in order that Herod can marry her (which is actually a pretty good deal for Philip, because usually the king would just have the husband killed and then take the widow for a wife - for a really good example, read 2 Samuel 11 & 12). John, however, gets wind of this, and speaks out the truth. Because the truth of the Law of Moses says that, while it is indeed not only Lawful but in fulfillment of the Law for a brother to marry his brother's wife, that is to happen only AFTER the brother is dead. The dual purpose of that is to provide food and shelter - that is, a home - for the widow, and to produce a male heir for the dead man, so his name and his property live on.

But John has been preaching that what Herod has done is Not Good. And, if you can believe it, this truth telling raises the ire of the woman involved, Who begins advocating for the permanent silencing of this hairy guy from the Judean wilderness. In an attempt to quiet his new wife, Herod has John arrested, yet he goes out of his way to visit him in prison and get into lengthy discourses with the seer. Wife, however, is NOT satisfied, and continues to look for a way to stop John's proclamations altogether. The opportunity arises when, for Herod's birthday, the young woman Herodias dances for the king. The king, in turn, is so, ah, shall we say "moved" by this performance, that he promises her anything, up to half of the kingdom. This girl is indeed her mother's daughter, for she runs to mom (Herod's wife) (we're assuming she's an offspring of a union OTHER than Herod and his current spouse), tells mom what step-dad has said, and mom sees her day of reckoning. Mom knows what she wants: John's head, no body attached. Herod has promised, in front of witnesses. He can't back out without losing face; still, he delivers that which he is reluctant to give - the life of John. And so John is dead. All because he told the truth.

We have two guys who are in trouble for telling the truth. So why do we insist on telling the truth? People lie all the time. The latest thing in the news is about the CIA director lying to Congress. I am sure he wasn't the first, and I am equally as certain he won't be the last. We claim to hold truth to be "self evident." Clark Kent and Superman - what's the first thing that he fights for? "Truth, Justice, and the American Way." And yet, Oliver North lies to congress, is proud about his lies, and then gets Elected to Serve in Congress. We get other politicians who get caught up over what the definition of the word "is" is. We practically worship pop mega-stars who may or may not have had inappropriate relationships with minors. But, as it appears,

because they have money, they're not held accountable. Or maybe the whole thing was one big publicity stunt.

What's so great about the truth, when apparently the world isn't concerned about it?

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" says Jesus in John 14. Jesus is the Truth for which John the Baptizer is willing to give his life. When faced with jail, he could have backed off. He could have changed his tune. But John knew the Truth. Amos was an outsider, minding his own business. When Lord God Almighty grabs hold of him and gives him a message to deliver. He could have said, "You know, Lord, I'm kinda busy right now got this big business deal pending. Jeroboam really isn't going to listen to me; Amaziah doesn't like me; why don't you get somebody else to deliver this for you?"

The truth is not always nice. It's not always easy to hear. It doesn't always bring about smiles and joy and laughter. More often than not, the truth convicts us, as with John and Herod. The truth holds us accountable to the wrongs around us. As with Amos and Jeroboam. Speaking the truth does not make us Popular, or Witty, or Well liked. Speaking the truth, though, the truth that God loves us, always; the truth that God forgives us, no matter what we do. The truth that God is with us, in ALL that happens to us. God IS The Truth.

Why would we dare to speak anything else?

Amen.