

The Sunday Missive – July 11, 2021
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Hymn 436 Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates

Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates; behold, the King of glory waits!
The King of kings is drawing near; the Savior of the world is here.

O blest the land, the city blest, where Christ as ruler is confessed!
O happy hearts and happy homes to whom this King of triumph comes!

Fling wide the portals of your heart; make it a temple, set apart
From earthly use for heaven's employ, adorned with prayer and love and joy.

Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to thee: here, Lord, abide!
Let me thy inner presence feel: thy grace and love in me reveal.

The Collect of the Day

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

A Reading from the Prophecy of Amos --Chapter 7:7-17

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.' "Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'" Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

Psalm 85

Lord, you were favorable to your land* You restored the fortunes of Jacob.

You forgave the iniquity of your people* You pardoned all their sin. Selah

You withdrew all your wrath* You turned from your hot anger.

Restore us again, O God of our salvation* Put away your indignation toward us.

Will you be angry with us forever* Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

Show us your steadfast love, O Lord* And grant us your salvation.

Let me hear what the Lord will speak* For God will speak peace to those who turn to him in their hearts.

Surely salvation is at hand for those who fear God* That his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet* Righteousness and peace will kiss one another.

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground* And righteousness will look down from the sky.

A Reading from the Letter to the Ephesians -- Chapter 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, 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; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Hymn 686 Come, thou fount of every blessing

Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace!
Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! O fix me on it, mount of God's unchanging love.

Here I find my greatest treasure; hither by thy help, I've come;
And I hope, by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.

Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee;
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.

The Holy Gospel according to Mark -- Chapter 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, 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." 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 he heard him, 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." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She 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. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

The Real Deal – Proper 10B

Once again, we have the challenge today of making sense of ancient texts that are full of violence. The Bible is the Holy Word of God, yes, but that holy word is delivered as part of a storytelling tradition whose origins surely pre-date even spoken language. One brief glance at the publicity materials in any newspaper, for plays, films, television and the written word and we see that stories full of violence are still what we desire and somehow relate to: Good and Evil battling it out to the bitter end.

The history books tell us Herodias was the daughter of Aristobulus, son of Herod the Great and Mariamne, daughter of Hyrcanus. Her first husband was Philip, a son of Herod the Great and Mariamne. So she married her uncle, by whom she had Salome. Once, when Herod Antipas (the one in today's story) visited Rome, he was entertained by his brother Philip and Herodias. Like any good houseguest, Herod abducted his brother's wife. His own marriage was an obstacle, so he divorced his Arabian princess (I'd say she got off easy); Herodias became queen and, with her daughter was installed in the palace.

When Herod heard about Jesus, people were saying, "It is Elijah come back." Others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But Herod said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." Herod admired John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man. One of the things John had said was that Herod's alliance with his brother's wife Herodias was wrong. When he heard John talk, Herod didn't understand much, nor did he agree with everything, but he liked to listen to him so he had been protecting him. Nevertheless, Herod finally has the prophet killed in order to satisfy Herodias' guilty anger. The women in the Bible get blamed so often for what goes wrong that we can't put too much credence in the details, but Herod does kill his most provocative and truthful messenger, silences his most prophetic voice, in order to keep peace in his bedchamber.

Similarly, we hear Amaziah threatening Amos, because Amos has pointed out the severe unplumbiness of Jereboam and the Israelites under his rule. Amos says, "Hey, I didn't set out to prophesy, I'm just a humble herdsman and tree guy. And I'm not making this stuff up; I'm just passing it along. I was ordered to say these things by God himself. Don't kill the messenger." But, as we've seen with King David and the Amalekite, killing the messenger is not unusual. It still isn't.

As Amos reports: The Lord was standing there with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel, a metric for godly and upright conduct. I will never again overlook their bad behavior. Soon 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, ratted Amos out to King Jeroboam: "Amos says 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile.' And they were as afraid of Amos as Herod was of John. "O seer, go, flee away, never again prophesy at Bethel, for this is the king's sanctuary, a temple of the

kingdom.” He was at least exiled for his truth-telling; the legend says that Amaziah’s son assassinated him.

The truth for the Israelites under Jereboam, the truth that Amos plainly spoke was that their failure to follow God’s precepts was leading inexorably to deterioration, degradation and destruction as a people. The same would hold true for Herod, who failed to listen to John the Baptizer’s prophetic observations. The same will hold true for all civilizations who fail to see their reflection in the truth of the universe, who fail to restrain evil, not just in its most obvious forms, but in its most subtle, devious, self-justifying forms. The same will hold true for us, if we consider ourselves above, beyond or beside God’s precepts, if we fail to properly address greed, inequality, the degradation of poverty and our undeniable, progressive destruction of Creation.

When Jesus comes along, Herod flips out with guilty fear; he thinks Jesus might be John the Baptizer resurrected, a seer who has been killed but won’t stay dead, a zombie prophet. He’s closer than he knows: Jesus is indeed the living Word of God, the embodiment of permanent truth. Nobody can make him stay dead. Jesus came to embody God’s truth because revelation had proven insufficient. We just weren’t getting it. We still aren’t.

Paul writes to the Ephesians: “With all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the plan to -- in the fullness of time -- gather up all things in heaven and on earth. In Christ we have obtained the incarnation of that truth, so we might learn to live for the praise of God’s glory. When you hear the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believe it, you are filled with the Holy Spirit, which is proof of your redemption as one of God’s own people.” In other words, if you listen, hear, accept and attempt to put into action the simple precepts of God, as truly incarnate in Jesus the Christ, you are done; you graduate, you win. Even if you have little in the way of worldly accomplishments.

The great reform theologian John Calvin spoke of the threefold use of the law. Firstly, God’s precepts -- the Commandments and their interpretation -- serves as a mirror, reflecting the perfect righteousness of God. The law tells us much about who God is – about what is truth, and what constitutes human sinfulness. We know we are succeeding or failing by measuring ourselves against it. A second purpose for the law is the restraint of evil. The law, in and of itself, cannot change human hearts. But it can serve to protect the righteous from the unjust. Calvin says this purpose is “by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude

and justice.” The law allows for a limited measure of justice on this earth, until the last judgment is realized. The third purpose of the law is to reveal what is pleasing to God. As born-again children of God, the law enlightens us as to what is pleasing to our God, whom we seek to serve. Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” This is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give God honor and glory.

Thus the hunger of the psalmist, who cries: “Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, who will speak peace to the people, to those who turn to God in their hearts. Surely salvation is at hand for those who fear God, whose glory may dwell in our land. Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation. Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Emily Dickinson famously wrote: “Tell the truth, but tell it slant.” In other words, don’t invent truth, but always put your own creative stamp on the stories you tell. In order to tell the truth ‘slant’ you have to know it straight first. If each of our lives is a song, a variation, a permutation of God’s hope for humankind, how can we hope to make the music if we habitually set aside the tune of truth, or don’t come know it in the first place? It just won’t work. Just like in jazz – you got to know the song before you can riff on it. “I will provide the plumb line,” says the Lord, “I give you the sheet music for lives well lived, for future generations well served, if only you will read it and follow the bouncing ball. She writes the songs; she writes the songs.

Ohh, but it’s hard to stay in key at times. We must be alert and of sober mind. Our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Or as they say in the 12 step community, “While we’re in these AA meetings, our disease is out doing pushups in the parking lot.” And some of us are just jazzier than others. Permutations of the laws themselves develop. Here is the first of Chris Elliott’s *Ten Commandments of Playing Soul Music*: “When thou beatest with timbers upon goatskins stretched across wooden barrels, strike not directly upon the two and the four. Place thy blows ahead of or behind the beat, for when thou strikest directly upon the beat, thou wilt be judged unclean, yea unto the seventh generation...”

Some are jazzier than others, but God doesn’t tell us to be jazzy, God tells us to be obedient. The prophets point out to us the consequences of ignoring the music of our souls, the music of the spheres, the song of truth. The sins

of the parents will be visited upon the children, “yea unto the seventh generation,” – not because God delighteth in violence and punishment but because the repercussions, the consequences of our ungodly, violent, uncharitable, self-centered, superior, shortsighted, planet-trashing actions will affect our children and their children and their children long after we are gone. The stories we tell, about how our ungodly conduct will result in violence, about how Good will defeat Evil by violent means, about how Christian soldiers must be marching as to war, don’t seem to work too well. All too often they just make us want to be sure to be on the winning side of the violence; to prevail. The point may simply be too subtle for humankind to handle. God doesn’t want us to win, God wants us to walk in love. As Amos the dresser of sycamore trees most famously put it, God wants us to “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a never-ending stream.”

The moment we start telling stories of peace and concord instead, when we turn and try to redress our ills, to do and be just a little better, to reprioritize according to the precepts of God, then everything changes; anything is possible. God is not up there waiting for an opportunity to punish. God is not up there at all. God is in the moment. In every moment since the dawn of time. God is in and of and behind the existence of every cell, atom, lepton, boson and quark. God is wherever and whatever is: reality, truth and consequence. As such, God’s precepts exist, not as a punitive set of rules for us to obey or be condemned by. God’s precepts exist to reflect the constructive truths of human existence. Unless we whet our appetites for, tell stories about, and develop habits of following them, we will never be at home in Creation.

The Prayers of the People

O God of heaven and earth, through Jesus Christ you promise to hear us when we pray to you in faith with thanksgiving, and so we pray for one another, for our families and friends. Thank you for all who care for us. Give us grace to serve Christ by serving our families, our neighbours and our communities; by loving others even as we are loved.

(Silence)

We thank you for the unfailing love you hold out to everyone in Jesus Christ. Comfort those in sorrow, need, sickness or any other trouble, especially Red, Sue, Katharine, Karen, the family and friends of Don Rose are there others? (Silence) Bring healing and peace to

all those we hold in our hearts this day. Give them courage and hope in their distress, and bless those who care for them.

(Silence)

We remember with gratitude the bounty of your creation in the natural world and the richness of this land. Help us and people everywhere to share with justice and peace the resources of the earth. Give to those in authority among us and to all leaders of the nations more wisdom, integrity, vision and compassion May their purposes and policies be only and always in the holy name of a healthy and equitable world.

(Silence)

We remember especially this day the truths of our nation's past. We open our hearts to examine, listen and understand the terrible trauma caused by human slavery and genocide in our past and to end the ongoing tragedies, injustices and falsehoods that keep our society so shamefully and violently divided. (Silence)

We remember with thanksgiving all who have died in Christ, especially all victims of the Covid pandemic, all victims of gunfire in our land, and those we hold in our hearts, especially Don. Are there others? (Silence) We rejoice at the faithful witness of your saints in every age, praying that we may enter with them into the unending joy of your heavenly kingdom.

Amen.

Hymn 372 Praise to the living God

Praise to the living God! All praised be his Name
Who was, and is, and is to be, for ay the same.
The one eternal God ere aught that now appears:
The first, the last, beyond all thought his timeless years!

Formless, all lovely forms declare his loveliness;
Holy, no holiness of earth can his express.
Lo, he is Lord of all. Creation speaks his praise,
And everywhere above, below, his will obeys.

His Spirit floweth free, high surging where it will:
In prophet's word he spake of old: he speaketh still.
Established is his law, and changeless it shall stand,
Deep writ upon the human heart, on sea, on land.

Eternal life hath he implanted in the soul;
His love shall be our strength and stay while ages roll.
Praise to the living God! All praised be his Name
Who was, and is, and is to be, for aye the same.

Hymn 492 Sing, ye faithful, sing with gladness

Sing, ye faithful, sing with gladness, wake your noblest, sweetest strain,
With the praises of your Savior let his house resound again;
Him let all your music honor, and your songs exalt his reign.

Sing how he come forth from heaven, bowed himself to Bethlehem's cave,
Stooped to wear the servant's vesture, bore the pain, the cross, the grave,
Passed within the gates of darkness, thence his banished ones to save.

So, he tasted death for mortals, he, of human-kind the head,
Sinless one, among the sinful, Prince of life, among the dead;
Thus he wrought the full redemption, and the captor captive led.

Now on high, yet ever with us, from his Father's throne the Son
Rules and guides the world he ransomed, till the appointed work be done,
Till he see, renewed and perfect, all things gathered into one.

A Landscape

This painting of a barn and barnyard near sundown
May be enough to suggest we don't have to turn
From the visible world to the invisible
In order to grasp the truth of things.
We don't always have to distrust appearances.
Not if we're patient. Not if we're willing
To wait for the sun to reach the angle
When whatever it touches, however retiring,
Feels invited to step forward
Into a moment that might seem to us
Familiar if we gave ourselves more often
To the task of witnessing. Now to witness
A barn and barnyard on a day of rest
When the usual veil of dust and smoke
Is lifted a moment and things appear
To resemble closely what in fact they are.

Carl Dennis