

Pentecost 6/Lectionary 15

July 12, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

With my profession being listed in all the direct-mail databases as “clergy,” I receive some pretty interesting mail. Take, for instance, this advertisement for a religious magazine, proclaiming it to be the “prophetic voice for the endtimes.” The ads says this magazine offers “Biblical analysis to help you understand today’s world events and what is soon to come.” Another circular trumpeted a new book, claiming to answer the most frequently asked questions about Biblical prophecy, things like: What does the future hold for America? And, Can we expect a nuclear war?

Using what these people call “Biblical analysis,” they claim to have “cracked the code” of the Bible. It’s as if there’s some secret knowledge contained in the Bible that only those with the secret spiritual knowledge or the most advanced computing technology can find. And they’ll offer to give you this information... for a fee. The book these advertisers wanted to sell me – the book which claimed to contain the answers to all my most burning questions about the future of humanity – was being offered to me at the bargain-basement price of \$11.99.

It seems that everyone is looking for answers. We want to know what's going to happen in this troubled world of ours. We want to know what's the right thing to do, the "right" political or ethical stands to take. But the question beneath those questions is: Am I living a life that's right in God's eyes? And, the ultimate question: How do I know that God really loves and cares for me?

People have been seeking answers to this ultimate question, and all those that come from it, for thousands of years. I daresay that fortune-tellers and soothsayers are as popular now as they were over three thousand years ago. It doesn't take much looking to find the local palm reader's shop. I saw one just the other day. It seems that troubled economic times bring these charlatans out in droves.

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Today's Old Testament reading is from the book of Amos, named for the prophet of the mid-eighth century B.C. I'd like to spend some time today talking about Amos, because he's one that our three-year lectionary cycle doesn't give us much opportunity to explore. Texts from Amos show up in our lectionary only five times in the entire three-year cycle. And yet, Amos is considered one of the most important prophets of the Old Testament. He's like a model of the Biblical prophet, both in person and in message.

In contrast to fortune tellers and the like, Biblical prophets were rarely in the business of predicting the future. When God called a prophet, the call was to speak a specific message to a specific group of people. It's true that sometimes the message included consequences, but it was not the prophets' primary purpose to predict doom and gloom to the people. Their primary purpose was to speak on behalf of God, reminding God's people that they were chosen for a special purpose. And often, the prophet declared that God's people had strayed from their intended purpose.

That is where we find ourselves at the beginning of today's reading from Amos. It starts with a curious image. Now I know we have quite a few people in the congregation who have carpentry skills, so this is an image that many of you probably understand. For the rest of us, however, let me try to explain...

What they used back in Amos' time to show if a wall was straight was a device called a plumb line. It's simply a weight attached to the end of a string, and when held up against a wall, would show if it's straight – that's called being “plumb” – or not.

So, at the beginning of today's reading, Amos sees God standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, holding a plumb line. And the Lord says, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel." And then God proceeds to tell Amos all the bad things that are going to happen to them. In other words, God has held up a measure of straightness next to the chosen people, and found that they're not straight. They're off-kilter. And because of that, God is going to do some things to help bring them back into plumb, make them square again.

It was this sort of message that God's Old Testament prophets most frequently brought to the people. God typically called a prophet when the people became skewed and were not behaving in the way that God's chosen people should act. But God also called prophets to speak to the other nations – as you'll find when you read the rest of the book of Amos – and inform them of their shortcomings, and the consequences for their bad choices. God was not just the God of the Israelites; God is the God of the world, who describes how all peoples are to behave ethically toward one another.

And what was God's most frequent complaint which led to the call of a prophet? That the people were not behaving with justice. The wealthy prospered, but they had no regard for the poor. They relentlessly pursued power, merely to exercise that power over others. They had become irresponsible stewards of the prosperity and power they had been granted.

Now we hear from this reading in Amos that God is going to bring all sorts of destruction on the chosen people because they are off plumb. God is going to destroy their high places – the shrines – and the sanctuaries in Israel, and kill King Jeroboam. This certainly sounds like a God of wrath, doesn't it? And yet, even though this message sounds like doom and gloom, it is a message of love for the chosen people. Because, in this destruction, the people will once again be brought back into plumb, they will be turned away from worshipping false gods, and a new king will rule them – hopefully one who will lead them in paths of righteousness. The gospel message in this text is that God loves the people enough to intervene, to prevent them from destroying themselves, and bring them back into a right relationship.

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Now, fast forward to our Gospel reading for today. It's 800 years later. King Herod has heard of Jesus' preaching. He, and everyone else it would seem, are trying to figure out just who this Jesus person is. Is he John the Baptist come back to life? Is he Elijah returned from Heaven? Or, is he a prophet like the prophets of the Old Testament?

After this initial scene, Mark turns back to John the Baptist – the latest of God's prophets. Through a flashback Mark tells us about the end of John's life. If we compare the message that John the Baptist preached to the message of Amos, we find that they are very similar. John the Baptist also declared to the people that they were off-kilter – sinful – and needed to repent of their sins and be forgiven. And, he also told the people what God was getting ready to do on account of their sin; John the Baptist told them that Jesus was coming.

So, maybe John the Baptist was cut from the very same cloth that Amos was. He was called to declare God's message to the people. They had sinned and fallen short; and, something needed to be done to restore them to their intended relationship with God. How curious it is that in our passage from Amos God used an image from carpentry to show the sinfulness of the people, and in the Gospel of Mark, we find that God has send a carpenter – Jesus Christ – to heal the sin of the world.

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But let us return to our earlier question: Is Jesus a prophet like the prophets of the Old Testament? I would have to say no, and on two accounts. Jesus was not only a prophet: a person sent to declare God's desire to be in relationship with his chosen people, and tell them the way that this will be accomplished. Jesus was also God's own self, taking on human form and becoming one of us, in order to provide the ultimate and final reconciliation with us. God was no longer going to chastise the chosen people into a right relationship. God, in Jesus Christ, set forth to *love* us into a right relationship, even if that meant Jesus' death on a cross. In Jesus' death on the cross, our sin has been wiped away. We are restored into relationship with God, the relationship that God intends for all people.

This is the answer to that ultimate question: Does God really love and care for me? The answer is: Yes! God cares enough about being in relationship with you to have come to earth and become a man. God loves you enough that Jesus Christ – whose life was perfectly upright and blameless – was crucified on our behalf. God loves you enough that in this single, extraordinary act, our sin was healed.

Through the gift of faith that God gives us, we have this saving knowledge. It's not coded away in a book. It's not spiritually revealed only to a select few. This is knowledge that is openly and easily available to all people.

The message of the Bible is as easy as that. Take and read. God loves you. God wants to be in relationship with you. God wants to live with you forever. Period. No secret messages in the Bible, no super-secret knowledge that someone is only willing to give you for a price. Don't you think that the price Jesus paid on the cross was enough? I certainly do.

Amen.

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