

## Proper 10B

### Mark 6:14-29

Sunday, July 11, 2021

A wonderful story exists about a lecture offered by Brevard Childs, an Old Testament professor at Yale. Childs taught a popular class on the prophets. Among the great themes of the class was the tension between prophetic faithfulness to God versus corrupted political and worldly power. Doubtless, a thorny and ubiquitous issue down through human history! Today's passage from Amos offers a powerful window into such a showdown. Amos is the prophet of God from the south. Amaziah is the priest and Jeroboam the king from the Northern Kingdom. Amos speaks the words that Amaziah and Jeroboam do not want to hear, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land." To which Amaziah responds 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." Basically, go back from whence you came, punk! The passage finishes with Amos' simple but powerful rebuttal, "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.'" Would that we all could receive such clarity in our callings!

According to the story, Childs unpacks the narrative and highlights the tension for the class of students who will soon be priests and pastors in parishes around the country. He notes the importance of the prophetic voice as a part of the tradition that they will soon enter. He underscores how important it is for corrupted power to be challenged for the life of those on the margins and others compromised by such abuse. You can imagine that all the while, most of the students listening align themselves with the person of Amos. Who wouldn't? Amos was right! He was God's person in the breach. However, Childs ends the class by challenging the students. "Remember," he tells them, "you will find yourself in ministry believing that you are Amos, the prophet, the voice of God. Yet, it is precisely at those moments that you must consider that *you* actually are Amaziah!"

We are wise to heed Brevard Childs' counsel. What he describes is the persistent human condition. With the best of intentions, we believe ourselves to be doing the right thing, the helpful thing, the work of God. When, in fact, we may very well be doing just the opposite. The wrong thing, the unhelpful thing, the work that opposes God's will. With our limitations, desires, egotism, fear, along with our inability to know fully and to see completely the consequences of our actions, our history is littered with all sorts of examples of overreaching and the best of intentions creating the worst of scenarios.

Thus, we should not be surprised by the story that we read in today's gospel from Mark: the beheading of John the Baptist. For anyone who lives with the illusion that all the stories in the Bible are morally rich and provide wisdom for living, let this story be a reminder that the Bible is filled with every type of literature, even the stuff of soap operas. And that is what we have in spades. Consider: Herod married his brother's wife. His wife has it in for John the Baptist. And she schemes for just the right moment to have John's head on a platter. So much for morality, edification, and enlightenment! Innocent life is destroyed. Corrupt power remains in the hands of those who have no right ascending to it, let alone wielding it. And there is no

moral to the story that makes us feel better. It is not a pretty picture. It is the reality of so much of life and life in the world.

Yet, this narrative underscores that it is into such a world that Jesus enters. In fact, the story functions, partially, as a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus. Again, innocent life destroyed and corrupt power allowed to continue. The chasm between the realm of this world and the realm of God is driven home. The sad reality is that Herod's world keeps rearing its ugly head even as we try to live into the world of God. The cover story for *The New York Times Magazine* for July 4, drives this point home. In "Can You Please Help Me Get Out of Prison?" Emily Bazelon tells the story of Yutico Briley who, at 19, was unjustly imprisoned for 60 years without parole in New Orleans. Without her work, the work of her law professor sister, and the removal of the corrupt and heartless prosecutor and judge, Briley would still be behind bars. It wasn't the head of John the Baptist, but the abuse of power meted out against those marginalized and powerless repeated itself again. As it has throughout the ages.

To read the beheading of John the Baptist, to know the story of Jesus' crucifixion, to hear the prophet Amos speak, one cannot be indifferent to such injustice and abuse of power. Christianity early on recognized that advocating for God's justice, love, and mercy in the world would bring with it problematic consequences. In some cases, even death. For power that is threatened will do all that it can to remain in control. However, as Christianity developed as a powerful institution aligned with political power, it became much harder to differentiate the voice of God from the allure of the world. Indeed, as one commentator notes, "The challenge of the twenty-first century is for the body of Christ to read our own decisions in light of [John the Baptist's story] and ask ourselves whether the choices we are making are self-protective, or part of God's transformation of the world." Do we side with power to keep what is ours, or do we follow the example of Jesus and offer ourselves to a hurting and suffering world? Do we hold onto our positions of privilege at the expense of others? Do we conveniently acquiesce to the ways of the world rather than struggle to embody the love, mercy, and justice of God embodied in Jesus' life?

The *Sacred Ground* group which has been meeting over the summer to work through a rich syllabus on understanding more fully systemic racism, white supremacy, and anti-black bias wrestles with these types of questions. "What can we do and what should we do?" are common themes. They are critical and painful questions as we face the legacy of marginalization and violence toward a whole sector of our society. They are not questions that offer easy answers. The questions remind us that we have much more work to do in bringing a bit more of the realm of God into the presence of this world. A classic example of the people of God doing exactly that which is opposed to God arose in a discussion this past week on how Native Americans were treated when Europeans came to America. The Doctrine of Discovery, which was, in part, the Church's blessing on European colonization, undoubtedly expresses the warped thinking of believers in that day. Yet, such history forces us to consider what it is that we are doing that generations from now will look on and shake their heads and ask how we could be so blind. Will it be our treatment of the poor? Will it be our indifference to those who lack health care? Will it be our myopic understanding of immigration? Will it be marginalizing those who are LGBTQA+? Or what else might it be? We are wise to wrestle with such realities. Indeed, if we are not careful, we may be classic examples of what Brevard Childs warned against in that Yale classroom. Believing that we are Amos, that prophetic, Godly voice, we really are Amaziah the mouthpiece for unjust and corrupt power. And if this is true, God help us. God forgive us.