



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

John the Baptizer

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 11, 2021

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost;

Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

Nothing could be more warming to the hearts of parishioners, who have been kept away from church for a long while, than to hear the soothing story of the beheading of John the Baptizer. And nothing could be more warming to the heart of a preacher than having the opportunity to stare into this impenetrable gospel text in search of the smallest particle of Good News in it. What we can know for certain is that God must have a wonderful sense of humor for these readings to be assigned on a Sunday when we're celebrating the return of the 11:00 am service and our beloved choir after a grim pandemic.

There's an old story about a Rector who served a very busy church who decided he needed to take a break. So he made a decision to take the next Sunday off to go and play golf. But instead of telling his Wardens and Vestry the truth, he told them that he'd been invited to preach in a neighboring city, and he needed to be away for that next Sunday. Then he arranged for another clergyperson to take his place.

The following Sunday came, and the Lord looked down as the Rector was about to take his first swing on the golf course. Speaking to an angel, the Lord said, "Watch this. I'll teach him a lesson." The Rector swung and his very first shot was a hole-in-one! Then he lined up again and again, and, each and every time, he got a hole-in-one. After a while the angel couldn't contain himself. "Lord," he said. "I thought you were going to teach this man a lesson!" The Lord smiled and said, "Think about it. He's never had a hole-in-one in his entire life, and now he's got all of these. And who can he tell?"ⁱ

Sometimes we know something we absolutely must share, no matter what. Today's scripture readings feature two prophets who speak words of truth to power. Amos, "who was among the shepherds of Tekoa," and John, the Baptizer.

Now, the Book of Amos belongs to a collection of Old Testament writings called the Book of the Twelve, comprising the twelve Minor Prophets from Hosea to Malachi. They're called "minor prophets" because of the length of their writings, but there's nothing "minor" about Amos. Amos was called to carry out a prophetic ministry in the northern kingdom of Israel in the first half of the 8th century BCE, even though he was a native of the southern kingdom.

The Book Amos was written a couple of generations before Israel was taken into exile by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BCE. In this period of time, with Israel's enemies not posing much of a threat, the development of international trade resulted in a high level of economic prosperity for the nation. Will it

surprise anyone to know that along with such great wealth came great greed? Social inequality and injustice escalated as the economic divide increased. But, because many Israelites considered Israel's economic prosperity a blessing from God, those injustices went unchallenged. There was only silence. No one wanted to speak truth to power. No one dared.

It's in this context that we find Amos called to deliver the word of the Lord—a word of impending judgement and exile for Israel.ⁱⁱ Amos shares three visions of judgement by the Lord God: a plague of locusts, a shower of fire, and a wall built with a plumbline. A plumbline is a line with a weight at the end. It's a tool used in construction to determine how straight a wall or building is being built. A mason or bricklayer may still use a plumbline today. The plumbline suggests Israel's religious, social, and political institutions have been “measured” and have been found “out of line” with God's ways. (By the way, phrases like “out of line” or “not measuring up” all originate with the plumbline.)

As we can easily imagine, this prophecy didn't go down well in the northern kingdom. Amaziah, the high priest in charge of the royal sanctuary at Bethel, sends word to his king, King Jeroboam, telling him, “the land is not able to bear all (of Amos') words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'”

Something had to be done about this troublesome prophet. “And (so) 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.’” In other words, “Go back home where you belong. Peddle crazy somewhere else. Make your living elsewhere.”

But Amos replies to the high priest and tells him he's not a professional prophet. He doesn't belong to the prophetic guild, the prophet's union; he doesn't make his living by offering prophecy. Instead, Amos tells Amaziah, he makes his living herding sheep and dressing sycamore trees (a kind of fig tree that required a worker to slit the fruits with a knife to induce ripening).

In other words, Amos isn't there for the money. He can't be bought. Amos isn't there for his own purposes. He can't be intimidated. Amos is only there because God sent him to be there, and the only word Amos has for the people of Israel is the word God has given him. It is truth to power, unvarnished, and offered without apology and without fear.

Which brings us to the gospel reading from Mark. Make no mistake about it. Today's gospel reading is an R-rated text that includes violence and just a little sexual innuendo. I can't think of a colder story of martyrdom in the Bible than the beheading of John the Baptizer. The story's very existence in the biblical narrative is a reminder that our faith doesn't exist in a pristine utopia. Our faith finds its existence in the real world, a world which includes cruelty and duplicity, violence and murder, and the abuse of power at the highest levels. The author of Mark wants the reader to know that Christianity isn't too fancy or too clean to get its hands dirty in reality.

It's clear the story's important to the author of Mark because it's the only story in Mark that doesn't feature Jesus and his disciples. It's the longest and most detailed description of John the Baptizer's arrest, imprisonment, and death found in the New Testament; and it's placed in the shortest and tersest gospel.ⁱⁱⁱ Why is that? Well, Mark doesn't believe you can understand Jesus unless you understand John. John the Baptizer is a forerunner to Jesus in a couple of different ways.

- His baptizing with water foreshadows Jesus' baptizing with the Holy Spirit.
- His preaching in the wilderness foreshadows Jesus' teaching and preaching
- His arrest and execution foreshadow the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

Herod Antipas has John arrested because John publicly condemned his marriage to Herodias as a violation of the Mosaic law against marrying your brother's wife. You'll find the prohibition in Leviticus 18:16, and it is, ironically, the very passage cited by England's King, Henry VIII, in support of the much-belated annulment of his first marriage.

In Mark's account, Herod Antipas is motivated by fear instead of his own convictions. He's worried about John's popularity. He keeps him alive because he's afraid of him. He only has him beheaded after he's seduced and tricked and fears that if he breaks the oath he made to his wife's daughter, Salome, he'll lose face in front of his courtiers and officials.

In this story, you can also see the foreshadowing of the moment when Jesus comes before Pilate, who also doesn't believe the man before him has done anything to warrant the death penalty. Still, in order to satisfy the wishes of the people, Jesus is handed over to be crucified. In a similar fashion, an innocent John the Baptizer is handed over to death as well. Now, the early Christians who heard this story would have known the martyrdom of John the Baptizer was intended to be an example, an illustration to them, because they, too, might be required to lay down their own lives on behalf of their faith.

We don't think much about martyrdom in New York City in 2021, but the growing number of Christian martyrs around the world suggests we might benefit from reflecting on this topic once in a while. According to *America Magazine*, *The Jesuit Review of Faith & Culture*, "More Christians were martyred in the 20th century than in all previous centuries combined, according to David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, two of the world's leading religious demographers. The trend has not abated in this century.

Though the statistics are uncertain and highly dependent on counting methodologies, the number of Christians killed for their faith every year almost certainly lies in the thousands and possibly tens of thousands. According to the International Society for Human Rights, Christians are estimated to make up 80 percent of those who are persecuted for their religion. They have been killed in India, Vietnam, Iraq, Colombia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Sri Lanka, China, and Indonesia."^{iv}

St. Ignatius of Antioch, a first-century bishop who was anticipating being fed to wild beasts by the Emperor Commodus, once wrote, "To make bread the wheat must be ground, and to make wine the grapes must be crushed, so I want my members to be broken and ground by the beasts' teeth to become a sacrifice to God." That's a harsh concept for a modern person to contemplate until we realize how comparatively little the body meant to our ancient forebears and, by contrast, how much the Spirit meant to them.

Daniel Philpott writes, "Martyrdom is a eucharistic act, Ignatius tells us. Like the Eucharist, it entails not only the martyr's death—which his executioners hope will annihilate his efforts—but also transformation. This transformation always involves the building of the church but also involves justice and reconciliation in politics, society and relations among churches and religions."^v Many of you have desperately missed receiving the Eucharist over this past year. You've been reminded of what the Sacraments mean to you, how they change and transform us, and, in return, how we become empowered to change and transform the world around us through them.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "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."

So here, here, is where we find the Good News. We are truly destined for adoption. In God, we *do* find redemption and forgiveness, "according to the riches of his grace that he has lavished on us." Lavished

upon us. We, the fragile followers of Christ, are empowered to speak truth to power, to ring out the reign of inequality and terror and to ring in the reign of justice and peace.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Copied, original source unknown

ⁱⁱ J. Ted Blakely, *A Lectors Commentary and Guide to the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*, St. Mark's Press, c. 2011, p 305-306

ⁱⁱⁱ *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B*, Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, editors, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, PA, c.1993, p. 343

^{iv} Daniel Philpott, "Modern Martyrs: Thousands die for their faith each year. How should the church respond?" *America Magazine; The Jesuit Review of Faith & Culture*, November 12, 2012 Issue

^v Ibid

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022