

July 15, 2018: Proper 10-B:

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

**Theme & Title:** Be a Truth-Teller

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As we’ve just mentioned in the Children’s sermon and as portrayed in today’s Old Testament and Gospel lessons, being a truth-teller can be risky business. In today’s Old Testament lesson and gospel reading, we meet two **prophets** who are “Truth Tellers” and willing to undertake great risk for the sake of God’s truth.

Before we consider these two prophets, it’s helpful to have an understanding of what biblical prophecy entails. Unfortunately, many Christians misunderstand biblical prophecy, thinking that it’s the same thing as fortune telling – that is, predicting something that is going to happen way off in the future: five years from now, a hundred years from now, or at the end of the world.<sup>1</sup> But in the bible, the prophets are more interested in **TRUTH-TELLING** than predicting the future. That is, prophets are those persons who speak the truth about current actions and behaviors and identify what the consequences might be unless those behaviors change. The goal of the prophet is to speak the truth with the hope that by so doing he or she will influence current behavior, which will then affect what might happen in the future. And true prophets speak the truth, regardless of what might happen to them as a result. For example, a physician is being a prophet when he tells a patient that unless he loses weight, eats a more nutritious diet, and exercises regularly the patient is likely to have a heart attack; but the patient now has a choice to make, which might include finding a different doctor. When a parent observes certain behaviors in their teenage child and cautions that child about those behaviors and encourages the child to change directions, the parent is being a prophet; but the parent knows that his or her teenager might reject any such advice out-of-hand. When you see an injustice occurring to someone else and speak out, you are being a prophet, but you might receive blow-back from whomever you have just confronted with the truth.

In today’s scriptures we meet both Amos and John the Baptist, two prophets who were “truth tellers”<sup>2</sup> and undertook great personal risk for the sake of the truth.

Amos, who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., was a simple man, who by profession was a shepherd and a dresser of Sycamore trees – in other words, he was a rancher and farmer. But God came to Amos and told him to travel from the rural hills of his own country in the southern kingdom of Judah and prophesy in the northern kingdom of Israel (~760 BCE).<sup>2</sup> Amos is to warn the people of Israel, who are very prosperous at the time, about four things:

- about relying on military power;
- about gaining wealth through social injustice and stomping on the backs of those less fortunate;

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<sup>1</sup>When we think of modern-day prophets, people like Jeanne Dixon (1904-1997) and Edgar Cayce (*d.* 1945) often come to mind.

<sup>2</sup>**Historical Note:** We know that Amos lived in Judah (8<sup>th</sup> cy BCE) on the edge of the wilderness, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. Following King Solomon’s reign, civil war erupted and the once-united Kingdom of Israel became divided into two parts: Judah in the south, with its capital at Jerusalem; and Israel to the north with its capital at Samaria.

- about engaging in immorality;
- and about practicing shallow religion.

Do these warnings of Amos ring any bells compared to our current American culture? They should!

God's call to Amos does not match up easily or obviously with his background, his geographical and social location, or his educational preparation for ministry. Amos was not a priest; he was not even a member of one of the local prophetic guilds; he had no credentials. And so, as one might imagine, given both his lack of credentials and his hard words, Amos's prophetic ministry was not very welcome in Israel. He was an outsider, speaking challenging words to the status quo of a prosperous time. It didn't take long before the king's own chief priest, a consummate ecclesiastical politician, stepped forward and denounced Amos, warning him to go back to Judah from whence he came.

The bible doesn't tell us what happened to Amos, but we do know that Amos, an ordinary person, saw the truth of what was happening around him and proclaimed that truth as God led him. Amos was a **truth-teller** and a **risk-taker**.

In the gospel reading today, Mark tells the story of John the Baptist, another **truth-teller** and **risk-taker**. John had boldly challenged King Herod Antipas'<sup>3</sup> adulterous behavior in taking his brother's wife, Herodias, as his own wife. John's words did not sit well with Herod, who then had John imprisoned, probably to keep him quiet. But John's words ignited a smoldering grudge and hatred in Herodias so that she wanted John dead. As a result Herod found himself in a dilemma: on the one hand, Herod wanted John to quit condemning him for his marriage to Herodias; but on the other hand, Herod feared John, perceiving him to be a righteous and holy man, and did not want John executed. So Herod tried to negotiate some complicated relationships and, of course, discovered that it's quite difficult to please everyone. He was at odds with John over his wife and at odds with his wife over John. Herod's birthday party complicated this already delicate balance further. Herod was so pleased by his daughter's dancing that he unwittingly promised her anything she might wish; and he unwisely swore an oath to that effect, apparently in front of all his guests. The daughter immediately sought her mother's advice and Herodias instructed her to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Though he didn't want to execute John, neither did Herod want to betray his oath in front of his guests. End result? He had John beheaded as per his daughter's request.

We can shake our heads in disgust at Herod's apparent vacillation and weakness, but we should first look to ourselves. Negotiating the spiritual and personal dilemmas of daily life is not easy for any of us; and we will often find ourselves pushed and pulled in conflicting directions. What are we willing to risk for the sake of truth? All of us will face those moments when we have to choose between what is right and what is easy. Even those in church leadership sometimes capitulate to the vociferous demands of some individual or group in our ministry in order to save face or keep the peace. Like Herod, most of us care what others think. We want to please those around us and want to keep the peace, even if that means sometimes playing loose with the truth. All too often we are unwilling to speak the truth, or will even tell a lie if we think it will get us what we want or desire.

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<sup>3</sup>*The son of King Herod the great who massacred the children in Bethlehem after Jesus was born; a relative of King Herod Agrippa I, who murdered James, Jesus disciple.*

I remember one parish leader with whom I worked many years ago who was full of ideas and projects she thought the church should undertake. So she would begin to lobby other congregational members to gain support for some idea. It occasionally got back to me that in her lobbying attempts she would tell another parish leader that she had discussed the project with me and that Pastor Cindy “supported” it. Though she may have mentioned the project to me in passing and I might have even thought it might be worth considering, I had not actually voiced “support” for it. Thus, this parish leader, in her desire to make something happen, had actually told a lie – perhaps a “white” lie but a lie nonetheless.

Unfortunately, not speaking the truth affects not only our own spiritual well-being but affects other people’s lives as well. It’s all too easy to be more like King Herod than like Amos or John the Baptist. So what to do? Perhaps we who claim to be Christian need to ponder the iconic story of Pinocchio from the children’s sermon today, and remember that every time we tell a lie or fail to tell the truth, we are changed and become less than what God created us to be. In telling a lie we lose a part of our true self. Perhaps we who claim to be Christian need to be more intentional about being modern-day truth-tellers like Amos and John the Baptist, but always remembering to speak *the truth in love* as St. Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4:15.

It takes courage to be a truth-teller as doing so can indeed be risky. Every time we speak up for love in the face of hate, we run the risk of outright rejection. Every time we tell the truth about an injustice and reach out to subvert that injustice, we risk hostility from those who are willing to do anything to get what they want at the expense of others or those who want to maintain the status quo. Every time we boldly confront wrong-doing or lies or just plain bad behavior, we risk being slapped down. But taking that risk is made easier when we remember who we are and remember the “*Faith of Our Fathers*” – today’s Hymn of the Day. It’s made easier when we actively seek God’s guidance through prayer, steeping ourselves in the Word of God, and through dialogue with other believers. And it’s easier when we focus on our Lord’s promises. Today during communion we’ll sing a paraphrase of Psalm 91 when we sing *On Eagles’ Wings*. In this song we proclaim God’s promise that we will “ *dwell in the shelter of the Lord,*” and that we “ *need not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day.*” Our God will raise up as on eagle’s wings. If we’re willing to be modern-day prophets and speak the truth, God will point the way and lead us on, even as we *Lift high the Cross*, our closing hymn today.