

(Sometimes) you simply can't make this stuff up, when life shares the very same shadows and light as the writings of the prophets and scripture.

(There) once was a king, who worshipped the power of wealth and influence. There once was a king, who cared more for his stuff, than the needs of the poor. There once was a king, who ignored the cries of the people who suffered in their poverty with despair.

There once was a king, who stood above the moral scrutiny of his critics. There once was a king, whose sexual exploits smacked of immorality and unethical behavior. There once was a king, to whom God sent a prophet, and the king replied...lies....fake news.

There once was a king.....

I couldn't make this up! (Amos,) was one of the earliest prophets of God to challenge the leanings of Israel toward the unbridled worship of wealth and power. Amos was not a priest, or man of renown. No, he was a shepherd, the lowest of the low. Uneducated. Unclean. Yet, spiritually intact. And God called him, the least likely of all to address the sins of the leader, the sins of the people, the sins of the land. And each accusation exposed the diminishing of the poor, the dismissal of women and children, and the absence of trust and belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In today's reading Amos (says,) "Um, Mr. King, sir, I'm watching you and your cabinet, and your family members, and your advisors." I am watching you and will measure you with this plumb line. You claim to be straight up and square...but as I see it....you ain't. Don't try to rationalize that you are the greatest king we've ever had....just look at your people. The gap between rich and poor has weakened our nation. Your claims that you aren't responsible for your actions are.... infantile.

I have (held up) the plumb-line and found you to be woefully crooked. That very fact will weaken the structure and strength of your house. Turn to the Lord, confess your sin, and seek the Lord's mercy.

Well, you and I know that that is not going to happen. And that is (what) makes the prophet Amos one of the most difficult for us to hear. Even though he wrote 2700 years ago, the similarities of the nation of his day, and the nation of ours is uncanny.

His warning was simple. It is probably a warning (most) of you used on your kids when you were raising them. "If you don't cut this out....you are going to be in big trouble!" Sound familiar?

Amos focused (on the) "whatever attitude" that the wealthy had toward the poor. The poor in your midst are hungry. Whatever. The poor in your midst need medical care. Whatever. The poor in your midst need housing, meaningful work, and a decent wage for their work. Whatever. Meanwhile the employers and bosses continued to pay meager wages while reaping the huge benefits of expensive contracts. In 2018 I am so glad we do not need to be concerned with anything like that! Whatever.

That (spirit) of indifference had lulled the people of Israel into a false sense of security. Abuse was simply acknowledged as “the price” of business.

But, it is a spiritual issue, (and that) draws us deeply into those dark waters where the Spirit of God renews our commitment to faithful and ethical behaviors. Yet today, when (mainline) religious leaders voice their concerns about social and economic issues it is never covered in the news. Ever! (But,) fundamentalists Franklin Graham or Pat Robertson often comment, as if speaking for all Christians flatly supporting injustice.

What is the spiritual (response) to the recognition that someone is in need? (If they) hunger? Feed them. If they are sick? Get them to a doctor. If they are homeless? Give them shelter. It is so easy, or is it?

It is not easy if your deepest desire is to have as much as you possibly can.

(Amos') warning would lead to a shift in Israel's history in about a hundred years. After that, they would never again have a king. Ever. And the kings that they would have in those 100 years would be corrupt, and broken, unethical and unjust. They would deem themselves above the law, and more so, above the parameters of the religious code of that day. Sound familiar?

650 years later, there would be (another) king, this one placed by the Roman Empire, there in Jerusalem. Herod bowed to the will of Rome, and supported a tax system that enriched both Rome and his family's coffers.

Mark is clear to tell us that (Herod) did not hate John the Baptist. In truth, he liked to talk with John, who most likely told him of the life of grace and mercy that God had in store for the people of Israel. There was a redeemable stripe in King Herod, even though John had written editorials in the Jerusalem Gazette about the affairs Herod had had. (His wife), the woman, would be the one who would take on herself the role of evil personified. Herodias, guilty from her adulterous liaison with her brother in law....has it out for the guy who is painting her in the bad-light of fake news.

(What) is it about politics that fosters such immoral behavior? What is it about politics that creates entitlement among its senior members?

Notice that Jesus is not mentioned in this detailed story. It appears midway through Mark's Gospel. Its placement is interesting: immediately following (Jesus) sending the disciples into the world two-by-two. Mark implies a foreshadowing of how the world will respond to the Gospel of Jesus. And following this story is the recounting of Jesus (feeding) the 5,000. This Gospel brings abundance to those who hunger and thirst. Does that sound familiar?

So why would Mark include this (story) of holy terror? The violence was meaningless. John dies for no good reason. John died because of a jaded, powerful woman, and a pitiful man of shallow character. John died at the whim of a clueless teenager. John died for a dance. The tragedy of this story is this: our worldly view, numbed to violence out there, will simply (respond) whatever.

There once was a king....who lost his way....and killed a child of God for no redeeming reason. It is a tragedy. It still is.

But, Mark does not end here, and neither do we. (Jesus) came from God to give to us the assurance of grace, and the gift of mercy, and our inheritance into eternal life.

There once was a king....who gave his very life....so that we might have eternal life. Not like the kings of Amos or Mark, not like the wanna-be kings of today. But one who loves and redeems us. The God and King tenacious enough to seek out and save a Thai soccer team....that kind of unbroken love for you. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Pastor Alan Field  
New Spirit Lutheran Church ELCA

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(Parenthesis denote slides)