

COMMENTS/QUESTIONS ON THE LESSONS FOR JULY 11, 2021

Amos 7:7-15

- What is meant by a “plumb line”? A plumb line is used to determine how straight a building is, with the implication that it would need to be torn down if it is leaning. Amos uses this as an image for the prophetic word against Israel: the “tower” of Israel is not measuring straight, and so it will need to be torn down.
- The passage also shows the conflict within religious leadership over the prophetic word. Too often, religious leadership is too closely tied to positions of power and neglect the “plumb line” of God’s concern for justice. We are thus challenged to ask whether we are open to the voice of critique, especially the voices from the outside, that call us to see God’s concern.

Psalm 85:8-13

- Note the verses that are left out of the psalm:
*LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you pardoned all their sin.
You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.
Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation towards us.
Will you be angry with us for ever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?
Will you not revive us again,
so that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.*

The psalm is a cry to God when the psalmist feels abandoned. The section we read on Sunday is the response to this cry and this feeling of abandonment.

- Note the use of bodily imagery and nature imagery. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet. Righteousness and peace kiss. Faithfulness springs up from the earth. Righteousness looks down from the sky. How can we let these qualities be embodied and “en-natured” with us?
- What does it mean that righteousness/justice “go before the Lord” and “prepare for God a pathway”? How do we prepare that way in our lives and in our community?

Ephesians 1:3-14

- Though our English translation has six sentences for this section, in Greek it is only one sentence!
- Notice the emphasis on God’s grace. Ephesians tells us that God “freely bestowed [grace] on us in the Beloved.” These verses tell us that God “lavished on us” “the riches of [God’s] grace.” Whenever we are tempted to see ourselves according to judgment, these verses remind us that God sees us and pours out upon us this incredible love and grace.
- At both the beginning of Ephesians and Colossians, we have the most incredibly inclusive statement perhaps in all of Scripture. The mystery of God’s will is simply this: “to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.” Nothing is outside of God’s design and desire. When we are tempted to exclude others or reject others, these words hold up a vision of how God longs to and will gather us all in the divine embrace. How do we begin to live out this vision?

Mark 6:14-29

- This passage shows the fate of the prophetic witness within a New Testament context. Because John the Baptist has spoken truth to power, Herod imprisons him. Because of the prophetic witness of John the Baptist, he will be beheaded. As Amos was rejected, as John was beheaded, so we continue to witness the death of God's prophets in every age, whether it be Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, Jr. Our challenge is to listen and discern God's voice, even when the words make us uncomfortable.
- But where is the good news – the gospel – in these words? Perhaps they are found in Herod's opening words when he believes that in Jesus, John has been raised. Though the powers seek to silence and put to death the prophetic witness, that witness – that word of God – lives on. That witness, that word, inspires others, is raised again in others. Where have the words of witnesses before you lived on in you? Where have your words lived on in others?