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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Troublemakers for the Lord

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Next Sunday – not this Sunday, but next Sunday – we will hear some lovely words about rest. In the Gospel Lesson then we will read these words:

The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while.” (Mark 6:30-31, RSV)

It’s a good summertime theme, and I am glad for it. I do hope that you all get some good rest this summer.

But that’s *next* Sunday. This Sunday is a different matter. This Sunday is not about rest, but about courage, faithfulness, and defeat – defeat, at least for now.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “Troublemakers for the Lord.” I am thinking of two of these troublemakers: the prophet Amos and John the Baptist. We read about them in this morning’s Bible readings: troublemakers for the Lord. This is a sermon about their courage, faithfulness, and their defeat.

Amos and John the Baptist: They are disturbers of the peace. And who needs that? This world has troubles enough. Who needs prophets to come along with their down-hearted words, like the words of Amos, one of this morning’s troublemakers:

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion... (Amos 6:1, KJV)

I rather like being at ease. It often feels to me that the world could use some more ease, including peace in the heart – a sense that, all things considered, we and the world are okay. But it’s not to be – not when there is sin and a true prophet is around.

AMOS

This morning’s first troublemaker is the prophet Amos. He is a good example of making waves. He disturbs things. He is a farmer by background. He works with his hands, and he uses the images of someone who works with his hands, as in his image of the plumbline. Amos comes on the scene during days of great prosperity and national influence for Israel, and dares to say that the nation is sick and headed toward disaster. If you measure the house of Israel against a plumbline, Amos says, you will find that the house is not straight and upright. It tilts, and if something is not soon done, it will collapse.

Amaziah, the professional prophet, complains about this farmer from Tekoa. Tekoa is in Judah, the southern kingdom, but this farmer Amos has marched on

up to Israel in the north and blasts the nation. Amaziah is a court prophet, with access to the king. So, he warns the king about the preaching of Amos:

¹⁰Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. (Amos 7:10, RSV)

Now, that is quite a saying! Amaziah says “the land is not able to bear all his words.” He does not dispute the *truth* of Amos’s words. He just warns that Amos is rocking the boat. “The land is not able to bear all his words.” Amaziah is probably earnest. He is a duly-installed officer of the temple and of the court. He seems to feel that his chief responsibility is to maintain peace and harmony among God’s people. The question of *truth* gets cast to the side. And in that, Amaziah makes a terrible mistake, for, in the end, if truth be cast aside, then peace and harmony could simply amount to the whole flock peacefully walking off a cliff together.

Amos stands up for the truth. He stands up for God. Amos is a prime illustration of Abraham Heschel’s description of the prophet:

The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul....God is raging in the prophet’s words.¹

You and I do not have God’s capacity for indignation. We would get entirely worn out if we noticed and complained about every sin, every discourtesy, every injustice that comes along. But God does not become weary. His eyes never glaze over when he beholds sin. When the widow is blown away by some rich man, for example, the Lord does not sigh, look away, and murmur, “Well, that’s the way of the world.” Instead, he rages about it. And a true prophet puts into words the Lord’s discontent.

That is, the *true* prophet expresses the Lord’s discontent. But not all prophets are true. Some are pretenders. And some have simply forgotten their old ideals.

Perhaps Amaziah was such a one. In the days of his youth, his heart might have burned with love of the Lord and with sincere desire to speak truly for God. But now, I guess, too many years have passed. Now, his sense of responsibility has shifted. No longer does he worry about the question of truth. Now he is preoccupied with questions of stability, harmony, and maintaining the status quo.

Notice how he addresses Amos. He does not say that Amos is wrong. He does not even deny that Amos is a prophet. Instead, Amaziah basically says that Amos should get lost:

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1962), pages 5-6.

In this way, Amaziah casts the truth to the wind. He probably thinks he is being a good leader, but he is in fact leading Israel into disaster.

So, Amaziah sends Amos packing. I imagine Amos returning home to Tekoa and taking up his old job again. He returns to his farm. The neighbors say, “Welcome home, Amos. You’ve been gone a while. What happened?” And all Amos can answer is that he went up north and spoke up for the Lord, as the Lord asked him to do. But he was expelled from Israel, and nothing remains for him now but to return to his farm. His ministry seems to have been a short one, but at least his conscience is clear. He stood up for the Lord as best he could. He met with defeat, for now, but his story is not done. Though he could not have known the good news at the time, the outcome of his life lies in the hands of Jesus. One day, Amos will find that his integrity has been worthwhile. Eternity was at stake, and Amos made the right choice, though he was defeated and sent home.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

What happened to John the Baptist is even worse. Like Amos, John was a disturber of the peace. He did not play politics. He was no good at pulling his punches. He put into words the Lord’s indignation at the adultery of King Herod. The world might sigh, dismiss the adultery, and say, “Well, that’s the way of kings and other powerful people.” But the Lord rages about such sin, and John the Baptist was honest enough to say so.

The pampered king goes down into the dungeon to hear the stern preacher. Or he summons the guards to bring the preacher to his throne room so that he can hear the mighty preacher preach away. It would have been sensible for John to lie low, to make no waves. After all, he is preaching to the one who holds his fate in his hands... *except* that John conducts himself as if he does not believe that. John conducts himself as if he simply does not believe that his fate lies in the hands of Herod. John rather believes that his fate lies in the hands of Jesus of Nazareth – the One John had pointed to, saying “Behold, the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Compared to the Lamb of God, Herod was not so impressive, at least to John the Baptist. So John preached against the marriage of Herod to Herodias:

¹⁸For John said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” (Mark 6:18, RSV)

It earned him the hatred of the King’s wife, Herodias. The Bible says that she “held a grudge against him and wanted to kill him,” and in the end she did. The honest preaching of John the Baptist cost him his life. He was beheaded. Not all prophets end up so bad. Not all of them are beheaded. But all *true* prophets are willing to speak the truth and let the chips fall where they will.

We Lutherans have reason to be proud of these two troublemakers – Amos and John the Baptist – because they were kindred spirits to our great teacher Martin Luther. Luther was like them in his courage and faithfulness. When he stood before Emperor Charles V in the year 1521, he feared and loved God more than

he feared and loved that man. When death loomed, when being burned at the stake was a real possibility, Luther was willing to stand up for the Word of God and accept what came. He could do no else, he explained, for his conscience was “captive to the Word of God.”

Oh for such captivity! The bars of Herod’s prison are a small matter compared to the glorious captivity to the Word of God. Sometimes it comes our way to stand up for the truth. If so, let us be true! In the long run, we will be glad that we did. Even if we are defeated, it is better to have at least tried to serve the Lord.

THE LORD’S FINAL WORD

I see that my list of troublemakers has grown to three: Amos, John the Baptist, and now Martin Luther. They are united in their loyalty to the truth, come what may. Let me tell you what else unites them: They all believe that the Lord’s final word is not fury and condemnation, but love. And in standing up for the Lord, it was as if they were throwing themselves into arms of the Lord. They were risking all on God’s goodness and love.

To develop this point, let us return briefly to the fierce preaching of the prophet Amos. The drama, I suggest, in his saying about the plumbline is that little pronoun “my.” Listen to his prophecy again. The LORD is speaking:

“Behold, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of *my* people Israel;
I will never again pass by them; (which means that the Lord will not “pass
by” their sins anymore)
⁹the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

It is a devastating judgment, and yet it includes that good and holy pronoun “my.” It means that even in the midst of his judgment, the Lord cannot bring himself to *disown* his people. Even as he judges them, they remain “my people Israel.” Centuries later, St. Paul will describe the Lord’s heart in a formal principle:

...as regards election they [the Jews] are beloved, for the sake
of their ancestors; ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are
irrevocable. (Romans 11:28-29, NRSV)

It is as if for God too, “love never ends.” Love is his final word. And if God judges, it is because most of all he loves. As the great text goes:

For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth... (Hebrews 12:6,
KJV)

It is the same with you and me. Love compels judgment. Love must cry out “Stop!” lest the loved one fall into disaster.

So, Amos of old, John the Baptist, and Martin Luther all, in their various ways, shouted “Stop!” But their cry to stop sinning was in service of God’s love. And it was to God’s love that they entrusted themselves. Amos could not stand by quietly while the rich man plundered the poor widow and while the people worshiped false gods. John the Baptist could not stand by quietly while King Herod and his wife Herodias continued their outlandish relationship. And Martin Luther could not stand by idly while false doctrine and practice beset the church. For all of these sins obscured a better way of life. All of these sins were but various forms of suffering and diminishment, for it can never be good for us to depart from the holy ways of our Maker. So, these troublemakers all took their stand with the Lord, fought for his loving ways to have sway in the lives of the people, and entrusted themselves to that love.

NONE OF US CAN ESCAPE

I doubt that any of us will sail through life and entirely escape the showdown between truth and safety. If we do not find ourselves speaking before kings, we might still find ourselves speaking before our own children or our own colleagues. Amos was brave before King Jeroboam, John the Baptist was brave before King Herod, and Martin Luther was brave before Emperor Charles V. We might never stand before such illustrious company. And yet we might well stand before the very ones God wants us to try to save.

God bless the mother and the father or the snow-haired grandmother who gathers up her courage and tries to get a young life back on track. Those young people often have sharp tongues. They might cut us to pieces. Their wit and their words seem faster than we can do. And yet, we might know something of the Word of God and of God’s love for these young ones, and it would be good for us to go ahead and be troublemakers for the Lord. Souls are at stake.

It is often said “Choose your battles.” And that certainly seems like good advice to me. A young legislator, a new judge, a beginning physician, *each of us* really could probably afford to go slow and be cautious about which battles we will fight. And yet, if we are not careful, we could well go our entire careers playing it safe. In our continual care to choose our battles, we might end up fighting no battles at all and thereby failing many people along the way.

Herod was haunted, wasn’t he? That’s how our Gospel story begins. Herod hears about mighty deeds abroad in the land, and his conscience immediately springs ahead to John the Baptist:

¹⁵...others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” (Mark 6:15-16, RSV)

Herod seems to have known deep in his bones that you cannot behead a good man like John without reality thereby being disturbed! Herod seems to have known that you cannot do such terrible sin as he did, and get away with it.

Likewise, in the end, John cannot fail. John can be beheaded, but John cannot be defeated. And it is not because *John*, whom Herod killed, has been raised, but because *Jesus* has been raised. Jesus has been raised to accept our stumbling words and our feeble efforts to stand up for the truth. Jesus has been raised to bring good from our attempts. Jesus has been raised to lift us up if we should fall trying to serve him. So be brave. Be true. Let us even risk much for the sake of the Lord, for in his hands, we are safe. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.