

It's hard to listen to God speak when you've already decided what God is going to say.

That was one of the more thought-provoking phrases I ran across recently while wasting time on the interwebs. Given the assorted postings my varied friends offer, the fact that something was thought provoking was kind of nice, since most of what we see online elicits more eye rolls and head shakes than thoughts.

Then I thought about that phrase in the context of today's readings. John and Amos are called to prophesy to some pretty powerful people. Amos' words are shared with King Jeroboam through Amaziah the priest and John speaks directly to Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Judea. People of power. People of influence, and People who felt they were put in their positions by divine providence.

Hearing the words of these prophet were not what someone appointed by God wanted to hear. They wanted to hear from God about the greatness of their work. They were the rulers anointed by God and thus all of their decisions were what God wanted, obviously.

What foolish people they were. And what foolish people we are.

All of us suffer from the fairytale syndrome when reading the Bible. We tend to put ourselves in the position of the oppressed because we are Christian. We are children of God. Jesus died for us. Thus we should definitely identify with Amos, John, and all of the others who are persecuted for preaching the word of God.

But the simple fact is that sometimes we are those folks and sometimes we are the rulers in today's readings. Sometimes we are the folks that believe that God put us in this place so our decisions must be the decisions God wants. We are be doing what God appointed us to do thus we must be in the right.

Wrong.

Just because I'm where God wants me doesn't mean I'm doing what God wants. And when someone points that out, it is NOT what I want to hear.

We all must admit that there are moments we find ourselves at odds with the true Gospel. You know that one, the inconvenient one that says things like "God so loved the world." That means that God loves the people we don't. This is my body, given for you and for all people, doesn't have any limiting phrases that denies communion to someone we disagree with. All means all, whether or not we like it. And far too often we as a church turn away the prophets whom God sends to find the right person to tell what we have decided God is going to say.

The word of God was not given to the prophets and written down to make lovely décor for our family rooms. The word of God was given to use as a pathway to live in love and harmony with God's creation. While that may sound rather Pollyanna and kumbaya-ish, it is the truth. The story of the Garden in Genesis isn't just to teach us how sin came into the world, but how the world would be if it were as God intended. Harmonious. With the planet having all it needs to sustain life, humans existing with one another, and life as God intended. That's not a story, that's a goal and God is constantly reminding us of it.

We want to hear the voice of God, not the word of God. We want the voice of God to tell us what we WANT to hear. The Word of God tells us what we need to hear, "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." Not think of yourself and hold your power where ever you may find it.

Herod had married Herodias for power. To do so meant abandoning Phasaelis, his first wife and daughter of the Nabatean King Arates IV (who would eventually slaughter Herod's kingdom). Herodias, according to the historian Josephus, divorced Herod's disgraced brother so that she could marry Herod and have power. It's a typical dysfunctional family and John is like that one relative who keeps pointing out the awkwardness.

Herod was moved by John, Herodias was annoyed. It wasn't Herod's power that John was threatening, it was Herodias. She had worked hard to get to that position and she needed to preserve it, despite knowing that she had gotten there through deceit, not love.

The dance of Salome leads Herod to swear an oath in front of the court. Dance for me and I'll give you anything you ask, even half my kingdom. So when her mother tells her to ask for John's head he's stuck between two bad choices. To go against an oath in front of his court makes him weak, and to silence John leaves Herod at odds with God.

Let's not condemn Herod too quickly. We've all been there. We have chosen saving face over the word of God. It might not have involved killing someone, but we've done it. We've gone with the little white lie. We've spoken ill of someone because it was the socially acceptable thing in the moment. We have made fun of the neighbor or talked about the unplanned pregnancy in their family to divert the attention from the embarrassing moment in our own. We are Herod more often than we are John.

But let us not forget the words of Amos.

*I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'*

The true word of God, love your neighbor as yourself, doesn't need any kind of special person to do it or say it. It just needs a neighbor. It needs someone who sees that God appears in our day to day lives more than we want to admit, sometimes for us and sometimes through us.

But we don't need to be anything special to be the presence of God's love in the world. After all, what good can come from Nazareth? About the same good that can come from Herkimer, Baldwinsville, or where ever someone is at any moment. It isn't what we are or who we are that makes us prophets, it is how we are. Speaking love and telling truth. Knowing that there is no person I pass any day that isn't a loved creation of God. They may be wrapped in dirty clothes or the finest bling, but at their heart, they are God's child. Put here for me to Love, whether I like it or them.

Those were the words of Amos and John. They were calling us to quit loving power over purpose. To stop looking at our own greatness and focusing on the greatness of the creation around us, and to look in the mirror and see ourselves as we see those around us, a poor miserable sinner, loved by God and forgiven by grace That simple truth remains though my station in life may come or go. and when I cling to that truth of love rather than to the world I've created and decided that God has made for me, then I will hear the word of God in the small actions, quiet silence, and simple truth. Love your neighbor, do justice, love kindness, and listen for the truth in the quiet, small voice where the world least expects it.