

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

July 11, 2021

Psalm 85:1–13 (ESV):

The Way of the Righteous and the Wicked

1 LORD, you were favorable to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;
you covered all their sin. Selah

3 You withdrew all your wrath;
you turned from your hot anger.

4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation,
and put away your indignation toward us!

5 Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

6 Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?

7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,
and grant us your salvation.

8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;
but let them not turn back to folly.

9 Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,
that glory may dwell in our land.

10 Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

11 Faithfulness springs up from the ground,
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

12 Yes, the LORD will give what is good,
and our land will yield its increase.

13 Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

First Reading: Amos 7:7–15 (ESV):

7 This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,

“Behold, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass by them;
9 the 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.”

Amos Accused

10 Then 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. 11 For thus Amos has said,

“ ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.’ ”

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

14 Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. 15 But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’

EPISTLE: Ephesians 1:3–14 (ESV):**Spiritual Blessings in Christ**

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love

5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

11 In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, 12 so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 4:26–34 (ESV):

The Death of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14–29 (ESV): 14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. 18 For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. 22 For when Herodias's

daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." **23** And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." **24** And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." **25** And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." **26** And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. **27** And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison **28** and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. **29** When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Sermon 28 – Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

"The Great Divide"

Amos 7:7-15

Dear friends,

Let's review the lessons for today. Paul is saying hi to the Ephesians by talking about predestination. That's not exactly how I would choose to say hi, I would rather just ask how your day went, but Paul plays by his own rules and Ephesians is as good an example of that as any. Did that back in 2018, don't necessarily want to retread that ground. The Gospel lesson has dancing girls asking for people's heads on plates and Herod's near-insane lack of judgment in thinking that this was a good idea. I don't even know where to go with that. It's hard to see the Christian value in watching John the Baptizer get beheaded, I guess we could talk about martyrdom but why? There's so many better examples of it, we are not persecuted here in Lander, so it doesn't have much to do with us anyway. So, instead of talking about predestination or cutting off people's heads or dancing girls let's talk about Amos in the Old Testament lesson and pray that I

can come up with something. As much as I love trying to help you guys understand the weirder parts of the Bible, some parts of the Bible are just too weird for me, so onto Amos we go.

Amos is a great little Old Testament prophet. He has a very unique style, and God makes him do some unique things, one of them is coming up in the lesson. Amos is the drill-sergeant prophet, he is here to make the people understand that God has a problem with them, because they have a problem with the sin of idolatry, and that unless the people repent and return to the worship of the true God, He is going to hurt them. Badly. This is all so far so prophet, what makes Amos unique is, as always, how he makes his points. Let's see how he does it.

“7 This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. 8 And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass by them; 9 the 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.”

Again, the summary of this is extremely basic. Repent of your sins or God will hurt you. All the prophets say that. But it is how Amos says it that we learn something here, specifically, what God shows Amos. God shows Amos a plumb line, which is used very much like we use them today, to make sure that things are properly aligned. It was also used to measure distances. There is something almost legal about measuring instruments. If they're doing their job right, a measurement will tell you, in cold hard numbers, what the facts are. Is this flush, or warped? Is it two meters, or a little off? Your eyes might think oh yeah that's straight, but the plumb line tells the truth. You could be wrong, you might be right, the measurements and the math will tell you which is which.

That's why God chooses this image, I think. He is sending the cold hard mathematical facts about Israel's idolatry right at them. He is measuring Israel, finding

what's straight edge and what's warped. It's hard to know how your average Joe Schmoe Israelite actually did their idolatry back then. Were these guys all mustache-twirling villains? I doubt it. They probably did what human beings do all the time: They found a way to justify themselves and their bad behavior. They made excuses. They weren't straight, but I think they'd managed to convince themselves they were straight. So God promises the facts. He's going to measure them by His absolutely perfect standards and tell them what they are, and God implies that His people aren't going to like the results.

You are far from idolatrous people, you lot here at Bethel, so comparison between you and I and what God is saying here might not be easy to make. You are here in church to meet and deal with God, and so the thing that I can say to you as caution is to remember that the people of Israel probably thought this too. We are very good at fooling ourselves into thinking we're okay. I don't think any of us think we're perfect, but we delude ourselves into thinking that this doesn't matter, we're good enough. We might be a little warped but we'll still fit right into the design. We're alright. God tells us otherwise, just as He tells Israel otherwise. His measurement is the Ten Commandments, complete and absolutely total compliance with those Ten Commandments. Anything less is not suitable for building. What do you do with bad wood? You throw it away. God reminds us here that His measure is beyond any of us, which is why we need Jesus and give thanks that we have Jesus as our Savior.

The plumb line represents something else though. Look at what God says in the middle of verse 8. Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the middle of my people Israel, and I'm not going to pass by them. God is drawing a line in the sand, but instead of cross this line you do not, God is saying the opposite. He's saying, I'm drawing a line down the middle of you, and I'm not going to cross it. You'll be over there, all alone with your sins, and me and my love will be over there. God is literally telling His people that He's going to toss them over the side of the fence and just be done with them. Remember the image Jesus describes of the rich man and Lazarus in that parable from the Gospels. There is a

big chasm between the rich man in hell and Lazarus in paradise. God is saying something similar. I just drew the line dividing you from me, and I'm not crossing that line.

This feeds into what I want to say next, but take a look at verse 12 and following first. **“12 And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, 13 but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”** Amaziah is the local priest who should really know better, and he's basically telling Amos to get lost, go somewhere else, because the king lives here, and your words are making the king mad. You prophesy somewhere else, Amos, because we don't like your words. This is another function of the dividing line that God is drawing in Israel. This part of what God wants to accomplish. God is the one who divides good from evil, who keeps those two concepts separate. God is the one who will judge the sheep and the goats, and determine which is which. This idea of a plumb line dividing Israel reflects that. God wants the good people, the people who repent, to stand up and be counted. God also wants the evil people, who refuse to repent, to just come out and own their evil, to be honest about their wickedness and their stubbornness, and so God forces both of them to do that.

Division is something we read a lot about today, and it is always described as bad in my experience. That we live in a politically divided country is quite obvious by now, and if you're anything like me you feel great anxiety, you worry a lot about how divided we are. After all, did not Jesus Himself say that a house divided against itself cannot stand? Sure He did. But looking at this Old Testament lesson, I am reminded that not all division is bad. Not all separation is bad. When God creates in Genesis, He divides the expanse of the sky from the waters, He separates waters from waters with land, and He calls it good. Finally, with the Ten Commandments themselves, you have an act of division and separation. When God gives the law, what is He doing? He's separating. This is good, this over here is evil, and the two do not mix. God is doing the same with His people. He is dividing good from evil, so that we can see clearly what is good and what is evil.

Repentance is good. Idolatry is evil. This is what idolatry looks like. Amaziah, by telling Amos he is not welcome, is showing himself as one who is evil, because he cannot stand to hear the words of God.

This is what God does for us. He divides us into good and evil so that we can clearly see and clearly know which is which. He does this in the Ten Commandments and throughout all the Law, that is the purpose of it. To show us what good is, Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me, to show us what evil is, Thou Shalt Neither Murder nor Give False Witness. God does this, not us. We as the church repeat God's judgments when we must, but they remain first of all God's judgments. Our judgment is too flawed, too keyed into what we think or what we like, for us to be able to do this with any righteousness. When we say that person is evil, that deed is bad, this is an act of bad faith, we could be very wrong, and we would do well to remember that. But that is the first and last gift God gives us. Not just the self-awareness to remember that, but the division between good and evil in ourselves. Jesus comes and tells us we are sinners, tells us we are on the wrong side of the line. Then Jesus lives, suffers, dies, and rises to pull us across that line, to make us fall on the side of good. His righteousness makes this happen, not ours, it is His good that we have, not our own. Jesus draws that line down the middle of you, in your heart and in your soul. He tells you that He is good, not you, but that He has made you good despite yourself. That line will divide you for the rest of your lives, that great Christian wobble between sinner and saint that we all struggle with. Sometimes we shine bright, we're really good, and God is pleased. Sometimes, we smear our sin all over it to where you can't see anything but, and God is not pleased. Jesus is there to give us the good, and there to take the bad onto the cross to die with Him.

Learn from Amos. God divides, and that is good. God divides to show you what good is, and God divides most of all to show you that He is good to you.

Amen