

**Prophets and Kings:
A Little Bit of Herod in Each of Us**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, July 12, 2009.

Alas, poor Amos. A simple farmer, he comes up to the king and thunders God's judgment on the people of Israel. Yes, our enemies are evil, says God, and they will be punished. But what about you?! You sell the righteous for stock options and corporate perks, you sell the needy for a pair of designer jeans and an iPhone, you lay yourselves on the altar of power and chase after the god of wealth while pushing into the dust the poor who get in your way. Amos thunders out Israel's sins against God: You know what justice is, yet you withhold food and shelter from your children, and medicine from your elderly. You threaten those that beg to keep their homes from foreclosure, but salary bonuses to those at the top. God sets a plumb line against your sagging values and you come up short. To which the king trembles and sends the word to Amos, "Go away! Go back to where you came from. The land is not able to bear your words!"

Poor John the Baptist. He's not even a farmer; he's a wild man who wears strange clothes and eats bugs. His favorite name for the people he ministers to is "brood of vipers." He comes to the palace and points the finger directly at King Herod—why he went and married his sister-in-law I don't know, but he did, and it was a moral sin. But Herod isn't surprised or even mad at John, and in fact he likes to hear him talk. John's a fiery figure who can entertain even a king with his words, and Herod isn't exactly in love with this land or its people to begin with, so he can tolerate John, in a kind of fascinated way. Herodias, of course, can't stand John, because to John, she IS the sin. So John pays the price of being a prophet—being beheaded at the request of a dancing girl.

The lesson that you might expect from the pulpit today is, we need to model ourselves after the prophets, and accept the cost of discipleship.

That's true, but that being said, I wonder—are we prophets—or are we kings? We confidently identify with the prophets. We never see ourselves in the kings. But consider this . . .

When I conduct anti-racism training, we talk about something called "white privilege." This is the hardest part of the training because it looks at the invisible backpack of privileges of being white—totally unearned but nevertheless enjoyed by whites in American society, just by virtue of being white. These are benefits like being able to be late to a meeting without your lateness reflecting on your race; or being able to dress sloppily without looking suspicious; or being able to congregate in a group without people being afraid of what you're doing; or being able to walk into a store and look around without being followed by the salesperson; or being able to do something good without being called a "credit to your race." Invisible privileges of being white, ingrained in American culture. Because they are embedded and therefore invisible, people get angry at the trainers when told that they carry these privileges and, indeed,

take advantage of these privileges. That's a very human reaction. It's hard being human. We don't take criticism well. We see our critics as tattletales, as did Herod, or traitors, as did Jeroboam, or as a "nation of whiners," as did somebody recently. We defend our actions or values, or deny them, or make excuses. Instead of "Yes, Lord, I have sinned," we say "Yes, Lord, I have sinned, but I have several excellent excuses." Like the king, we want to say to the critic, "Go away!" Like Herod, we want to silence our critics. Like the land, we are not able to bear the words.

The fact is, there is a little bit of Herod in each of us. We are both king and prophet, we are Jeroboam and Amos, we are Herod and John, we are challengers of the status quo and we are its defenders. In our personal life, we may have a short temper, or we may hoard our wealth, or we may be what Jesus spent the most time condemning—arrogant, self-righteous, judgmental. And criticism stings, doesn't it? In society, we are complicit in a whole host of social ills—discriminatory policies, bad stewardship of our resources, economic exploitation. Do you know that everything costs more when you're poor? When you're poor, you're charged higher interest rates, you don't get free checking, you pay higher prices for milk and eggs at the local UDF than at the big supermarket that you can't drive to because you don't own a car, but if you do have a car, you pay more for repairs because it's a beat-up 1981 Chevy—that's the social order. We are as likely to represent or uphold the social order as to challenge it.

So we like to see ourselves as Amos, but we are also Herod. You may ask, *What is the sin that gets me called a Herod?* I don't sell the poor for a corporate bonus. Nor do I have the habit of marrying my in-laws. But the issue is not so much the "what" as the "how." Of course we sin. But how do we deal with our sins—the personal sins that we commit, the social sins that we are complicit in maintaining? Do we, like the king, sit passively in the midst of an unjust status quo that we did not create but that we benefit from? Do we, like Herod, silence or imprison the critics of our bad habits, whether they be within our own minds or outside? Are we, like Israel, so unable to accept the truth of our sins that we sag away from the plumb line of God's righteousness and justice, and fall away from God's love?

Make straight the way of the Lord, says Isaiah; make straight a pathway right to our God. The plumb line measures the straightness, the rightness of our relationship with God. We make our way straight, not necessarily through being perfect—because of course we are not and never will be. We make our way straight by righting the wrongs, with the plumb line of God's absolute justice, building a land where mercy and truth meet, and where righteousness and peace kiss each other, as in the land of today's psalm, built with the plumb line of God. We look not at the magnitude of our perfection, or the magnitude of our sins. We look at the magnitude of our relationship and our connection with God. How do we restore a right—a straight—relationship with our God? That's the "how" that Jeroboam and Herod never asked.

The Cathedral's Plumb Line Ministry shows us one way to make right our relationship with God, by making right our relationship with our neighbors. Every time we find a place for our neighbors to live, food for them to eat, clothes from them to wear,

we align a little closer with that plumb line. But the real challenge, the real test against God's plumb line is to go deeper, to get to where that plumb line points, and to build in our neighbors and in ourselves the very character of God. As people who know how to be both prophets and kings, as people who are both fallen sinners and faithful followers, we are called to help build a right foundation for living, by living with generosity, compassion, forgiveness, mercy and truth, righteousness and peace—and by teaching our neighbors how to do the same. May we then be human plumb lines that point our community to God, and make straight the way of the Lord.