

Sermon for July 14, 2024
Highland Presbyterian Church
Sermon texts: Mark 6:14-29 and Amos 7:7-15
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I grew up understanding that religion and politics should never mix. In the church where I was raised, our pastors touched on politics only in the most oblique ways, focusing on our call to love and serve others but rarely examining the structural realities of class and race, and all the political forces that deeply affect peoples' lives. I took this inherent separation as a given, until I no longer could.

For me that moment came in high school when I studied the death penalty, including the arguments for and against it by Christians and other people of faith. I learned about how it was disproportionately meted out against Black people and people of color and about cases of confirmed and suspected wrongful executions. I encountered in scripture God's mercy towards Cain after he killed his brother Abel. For the first time, I found myself unable to distinguish my faith from my political convictions.

At first this made me feel conflicted, uncertain, but I've learned over time that the supposed separation of religion and politics is cultural more than scriptural. Because the Bible is full of politics. The making and breaking of kingdoms, the conquering and exile of people groups, treatment of immigrants, practices around sharing food with the poor. Just a few of the profoundly political themes that we find all over scripture.

Today, our texts address the politicized work of two prophets, Amos and John the Baptist.

Amos makes enemies when he prophesies the violent death of King Jeroboam as part of God's retribution for Israel's sins. Amaziah, one of the priests of Bethel, reports this to the king, and then instructs Amos to flee to Judah. Basically, Amaziah tells Amos to quit talking politics or get out of Israel. And

Amos responds with poignant conviction: "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 lectionary pairs this reading from the prophet with one of scripture's most disturbing passages. Herod Antipas heard chatter about the one they called Jesus and became convinced that John the Baptist, whom he had executed, had returned from the dead, and Mark gives us the scene as a twisted flashback. It's a complicated scandal of sex, religious law, and political power, and a young girl becomes complicit in the assassination of the prophet John at the behest of her mother and at the command of her stepfather.

We are told that Herod is conflicted about the decision: he likes listening to John even though he doesn't understand him; he keeps him alive even though his wife hates him; he has him killed even though it grieves him so that he can maintain his reputation before his court rather than break his poorly thought out promise to the younger Herodias. It's a political game, and John is the sacrificed pawn of a weak and fearful leader.

All week, I've been studying these texts and wrestling with the question of what it looks like for us to remain faithful amidst turbulent political times like the 8th century BCE during which Amos prophesied, like the days of the Roman Empire in which John was martyred, like the moments we are living through. I couldn't have anticipated the disturbing developments of yesterday evening, when a shooter used an assault rifle in an attempted assassination of Donald Trump, killing at least one bystander and injuring multiple others, including Trump himself.

I won't make a cheap metaphor after this emergency nor try to create any neat us-es and them-s. I'm still trying to find the right words as I stand here among you. There are ways in which this event is uniquely horrifying and exceptionally shocking. And there are ways in which it is one more devastatingly routine

mass shooting, one of more than a dozen recorded in the last seven days, according to the gun violence archive.

Coincidentally, before this horrifying event, yesterday the Washington Post published an article about the reliance of white Christian nationalist leaders on scripture to endorse violence against political enemies. There have been calls to vanquish the demons in the White House by whatever means necessary and threats to hang millstones around the necks of librarians who provide LGBTQ+ affirming materials to young people. Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation responsible for the Project 2025 manifesto, has vowed that the second American Revolution will be bloodless – if the left allows it to be.

There are those who seek to inextricably intertwine partisan politics, Christianity, and physical violence, and even if we detest their rhetoric, we see the linkage of these three in scripture passages like Amos 7 and Mark 6. And when physical violence and death is occurring in our domestic politics, and when U.S.-made and funded weapons kill innocent people across the world, I believe that more than ever we don't have the luxury of keeping our faith and politics in separate containers. When some are waging spiritual and literal warfare, our call to be peacemakers becomes more important than ever.

This doesn't mean that church should become one more political theater, but rather that we may allow our faith to bolster us and inspire us to follow Jesus with more vigor and hope in the face of rising hostility and understandable fear. In these roiling waters, compassion is a hard current to swim with. I talk about peace not as in passivity or tolerating injustice for the sake of civility but pursuing the peace of God's kingdom of righteousness and liberation for all.

Our scriptures reveal a dual calling — to be like Amos, both one willing to speak truth to power even when our risk is great and one who honors the care of sheep and trees in our lineage and in our selves. God calls us to both of

these ways of witnessing and peacemaking, and invites us again and again to compassion and care for others as we navigate uncertain times.

Because God bestows the gift of prophecy upon particular people or in particular moments. We do not have the words of the Holy Spirit burning on our tongues like a hot coal, at least not most days. So when we are not blessed with Spirit-led prophetic witness, who are we in these stories we've heard today?

Some days, we are Amaziah or Herod, listening in on the perplexing words of revolutionaries and trying to respond. Many days, we are like his courtiers, on the periphery, entertained but with no comprehension of the true stakes. It is easy to get caught up in the spectacle of politics, and even easier to cover our eyes and ears. When we do, the risk becomes all too great that we could fall into the trap of Herodias, conscripted into a political scheme that she did not understand, and for which other people suffered.

Instead — I wonder how we might be more like John's disciples, who undertake a tremendous work of compassion in the face of huge risk. We don't hear much about them in the gospels, but did you catch the line at the end? It had never stuck with me before I was studying the passage this week. While we are still reeling with the visceral image of John's head on the platter, Mark adds: "When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb."

This means John's disciples had to go to the property of Herod, who had just assassinated their teacher, the one who they believed was making way for the coming of the messiah. They pursued this one last task of care at great personal risk. Now, it's not like they introduced themselves to Herod himself. Perhaps they went to the guard station or the kitchen entrance. But still, to accomplish this task, they had to make themselves known to Herod's household as sympathetic to John's message. They had to become

conspicuous as people who might keep alive the story that John had begun to tell.

And that story did live, and Jesus's ministry flourished, but John was still killed — one more way in which he preceded Jesus himself. And even in death, John's people cared for him. Our call then is to works of both witness and compassion as we seek to follow Jesus, who suffered unimaginable violence under the joint persecution of religious and political powers.

The good news of our faith is that even when the risks are highest, we do not go alone but journey with the God who teaches us compassion and with the community who holds us in care. May it be so.