

PROPHETIC COMMUNITY
7.15.18 – B. HULL SOMERS – BLC

Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 1:3-14, Mark 6:14-29

I'm not really sure there is a fun illustration to begin a sermon about a beheaded prophet. Beheading is never funny.

There are a lot of things that are never funny.

When the space shuttle Challenger blew up while I and thousands of other elementary school children watched on live television, I was horrified. I remember coming to school the next day into my 2nd grade classroom. I had done my homework the night before like every other child and watched the launch of the ill-fated space craft. Our homework had become a lesson in the brutality of death. We watched as wives became widows, children became motherless. On that morning, Mrs. Allen, my second grade teacher, was stricken. Her face was white. As an adult I feel terrible for her – having to somehow unpack this heartbreaking disaster with twenty-five 8 year olds. She did a fantastic job under the circumstances. She simply had us all gather into a circle and hold hands and pray. It made my heart hurt less.

When I was a teenager and heard a joke about the Challenger crashing, I was angry. Senseless death is not funny. But it is all over, all the time.

Even in the Bible.

The fate of John the Baptist is one of the more senseless killings in the Biblical canon and that is saying something. Along with Uriah the Hittite, Samson, the babies in Psalm 137 and so many others, it is an example of death coming to the innocent. Life snuffed out by evil.

In Herod's defense, Herod did not want to kill John. Herod was fascinated by John. Herod saw truth and compelling courage in John. But Herod had a big party with several

hundred of his closest friends and his wife and daughter and he wanted to look like the big man. So – several drinks in, after his daughter had danced for his important guests making him look like a winner – he proclaimed his power with a, “hey, I can do anything I want – what should I do?” It was the classic, “hold my beer” moment. Unfortunately, Herod’s wife and daughter had been plotting and scheming of a way to kill John who had held Herod’s wife accountable for their wicked ways, and so they took advantage of Herod’s hubris and asked for the unthinkable – John’s head on a platter.

John was a prophet, and prophesy is terrifying to those who enjoy comfort and power because it is truth that penetrates status, reputation and facades, and for that, he died.

John did not just speak prophesy, he lived it. He proclaimed a new day, streams in the desert and he did so from the wilderness. Claiming the formerly uninhabitable as home. The dangerous as a space for truth. He took what was reserved and revered for the religious elite – sacrament, interpretation of Scriptures and Godself – and waved it around in the middle of this dangerous wilderness like it all belonged to everybody. This was an act of war against the religious authorities who relied upon the masses to line their pockets. They made a very swift income off being the only place that folk could get forgiveness, pray or experience the sacraments. There were profit margins worked in everywhere. In the changing of the money from the common currency to the Temple currency, in the special animals to be purchased within the temple grounds, to the extra fees for prayers of healing and protection.

John stood out in the wilderness with no fancy robes, no credentials and no holy of holies. He pointed to the wilderness and proclaimed God’s reign – God lives here in the chaos,

God lives here in my heart, God lives here in you; he invited people into the free water to symbolize new life, he prepared the way for the Messiah.

This was revolutionary and dangerous. What John started and Jesus perfected was a complete overhaul of what anyone anywhere had thought about God or religion. That healing is available for ALL, that God does not separate Godself from God's creation, that there is power in forgiveness and service, that there is a way of mutuality that does not use up others as commodities, but instead values every person made in the image of the Most High God.

In his prophetic ministry John proclaimed all this, spoke of the One who would come after him, and he ate locusts for dinner for goodness sakes.

This was all too scary for the powers that be so John had to die.

Prophecy is still scary.

We do not have a local guy in the Skagit River who lives off the land and proclaims the coming of the new day – and, let's be honest, if we did we would call him mentally ill and chuckle at him periodically, but mostly ignore him.

Prophets in our day look very different than John the Baptist. They do not wear hair shirts and eat locusts.

Prophets in our day look alarmingly like you and me.

After Pentecost, everybody was given the potential to be a prophet.

It has been so much fun to be reading Chris Hoke's book, *Wanted*. He is a prophet in our midst. In the book he tells of stories of times in his life where – time and time again – he chooses to follow the authority and promise of God and not of humanity. He has chosen to see

hope in seemingly hopeless situations, new life for folk who our culture has thrown away.

Streams in the desert.

And he is a regular guy.

He comes and sits in these pews the same as you, comes to the table and dips into the same cup that you do, is a son, a husband, a father, a friend. He does not stand in the Skagit with a hair shirt on eating locusts and honey. He stands beside you with the cranberry hymnal and eats cookies at coffee hour while chasing his toddler.

What if...Chris isn't the only prophet here? What if you are a prophet too? What if you chose to see the world, not for what it is but for what it could be drenched in the love and grace of God? What if you operated as though that love and grace were real and tangible and more true than anything that would oppose it? What if you truly believed in your heart that love is stronger than fear and that it will win? What if you tossed out judgment and treated every human being like a beloved child of God? What if you, like John the Baptist, took the proclamation of the goodness of God and slung it around like you were throwing out candy at a Fourth of July parade? What if you used the resources that you have been given, whatever they are, in service to others?

And then, church, dream bigger. What if our entire church together was a prophetic community, pointing to hope, love and reconciliation with all that we do? What if we became a beacon of the Kingdom in Burlington, the Valley, the world? What if we chose to look to the law of love and the gospel of peace as our highest aim? And inhabited the dangerous wilderness with extraordinary hope?

Thankfully, our prophesy will most likely not cause us to meet the same fate as John the Baptist. But he did not die in vain. Because the same God that called him to proclaim life-giving power in places of death and decay calls us...we take the message that he held high, and that so many others since have lived for and died for, and we move forward into prophetic life.

As we do this we will see the future as one of my favorite poets, Brian Andreas sees it. He writes, "I promise you not a moment will be lost as long as I have heart & voice to speak & we will walk again together with a thousand others & a thousand more & on & on until there is no one among us who does not know the truth: there is no future without love."

Church, you are prophets of the Most High God. Proclaim God's Kingdom Come. Amen.

This sermon is the intellectual property of Pastor Bethany Hull Somers. Please feel free to read and use for Christian education purposes but do not use or distribute without proper attribution. If you have any further questions about the use of this sermon, please email the church office: burlingtonlutheran@gmail.com