

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 10  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
July 11, 2021  
Amos 7:7-15  
Psalm 85:8-13  
Ephesians 1:3-14  
Mark 6:14-29

## **Standards of Measure**

Generally speaking, our gospel readings each Sunday give us stories about Jesus. Today is a little different. Today we have a story about someone very important to Jesus, someone embroiled in a set of circumstances that cost him his life. And we have the details of how that came about.

That someone is John, cousin of Jesus, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. John the Baptizer. The forerunner. The trail blazer. The son of the religious establishment who wound up leaving the neat and tidy religious life in Jerusalem for the wilds of the Jordan River and the desert beyond it.

What difference does it make to Jesus what happens to John?

We continue today in our journey with Mark, the gospel composed for and by a Jewish community of Jesus followers facing persecution by the Roman Empire in the first century. In the first chapter of Mark as well as in the fourth chapter of Matthew's gospel we hear that when John was arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem by Herod, Jesus stepped up his ministry in the Galilee region.

Up until John was arrested, Jesus, who had joined multitudes of other people in going out into the wilderness to be baptized by John in the Jordan, had been preparing himself and being prepared by God. He experienced God's blessing upon him at his baptism and then went into the wilderness on a forty-day vision quest. Then John is arrested, and a new direction is indicated. We could say that, in a certain way, John's imprisonment, which effectively ended his ministry, served as the precipitating event for the beginning of Jesus' ministry in earnest.

John was important to Jesus. He was his slightly older cousin. Their mothers had been pregnant with them at the same time. Their family, their lives, their ministries were in various ways intertwined.

While John was a free man and a free-range prophet, he flat out told Herod that he had done wrong. He had done wrong in divorcing his wife so that he could marry

his brother's wife. Herod was a regional ruler and was basically a puppet of the Roman establishment, but he had enough authority to have people thrown in prison upon his say so.

Herod had made a pastime of listening to John; he found him interesting—perplexing but interesting. But he didn't like John calling him out on his bad behavior. Since he considered John a holy person and a prophet, Herod didn't want to bring more difficulties on himself by acting too rashly in response to John. So, he decided just to have John put in prison.

*There, that takes care of that. We won't have to listen to him anymore.*

And that might have been that, except Herod's new wife held a grudge against John. She wanted him dead.

And so, on the great occasion of Herod's birthday at his big party when their daughter's dancing was so impressive and he promised to give her whatever she asked for, her mom was ready to coach her on her answer. Ask for the head of John the Baptizer. And the girl did just that. And Herod was instantly grief-stricken to hear this request. But he had made a big deal out of promising her whatever she asked for; he didn't want to lose face in front of all his guests.

John the Baptizer, a holy and righteous person, died because of a long-nurtured grudge and some over-the-top promises. And his death haunted Herod.

When Jesus' fame reached Herod in Jerusalem as Jesus continued his healing and teaching ministry in the region of Galilee around the big lake there, Herod was sure that John had come back to life. Guilty conscience. Unresolved issues.

What does this family drama around the death of John speak to us this morning? Is there now or has there ever been within me a fickle ruler? A grudge-holding spouse? A capricious twelve-year-old child?

What difference does it make to Jesus what happens to John?

John in his person, his life, and his ministry was a guide for Jesus and for others as well. Sometimes we say of such a person that we'd like to measure up to them. That is, we consider their example and their legacy a kind of measuring rod. In times of stress or conflict we may ask ourselves, *What would they do?*

Most families, most organizations have one or more people like this. Sometimes they are called guiding lights. They are reliable, genuine, trustworthy. Sometimes others say of them, “They are our True North.” We chart our course based on their example.

The first reading today from Amos gives another standard of measure, an ancient one known as a plumb line. It’s a simple but reliable technology, the forerunner of the levels we more commonly use today. It’s a weight at the end of a length of string. If you attach the unweighted end to the top of a wall, when it stops moving, you can tell whether the wall is plumb, whether its construction is up to par; specifically, you can tell if it is in alignment. Amos, a herder of sheep and a dresser of sycamore trees, is called upon by God to give a message to the king of his time that that king doesn’t want to hear, that God has set clear standards for the people of Israel and their king. God has a plumb line and will use it to measure them, to assess their alignment.

The second reading from the letter to the Ephesians gives us Jesus the Christ as the true standard of measure. Christ is hope, wisdom, insight, redemption, forgiveness, inheritance, salvation.

Perhaps sometimes we find these reliable, genuine, trustworthy standards of measure comforting. Perhaps at other times we find fault with ourselves and one another for not measuring up.

What if we are not so holy and steady as John the Baptizer? What if we are not as willing as Amos to leave our customary work for a time to carry out a particular mission God has laid on our heart? What if we are beyond grateful for all that God has done and is doing and will do for us in and with and through Christ Jesus but sometimes trip up on whether we are deserving of it?

Well, for starters, if any or all of those things are true of us, we are in good company. Patriarchs, matriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints before us have had similar concerns. For centuries our forebears in life and faith have contended with these same questions.

We know that God is God and eternal, and we are not: we are mortal. Sometimes though we act as if we have control over everything. And other times we act as if we have power to do nothing.

We are called to orient ourselves by the reliable, genuine, trustworthy models we find in Amos, in John, in Jesus and other significant persons each of us could name.

And we are called to be and to become who we ourselves are, revealing the image of God we bear. What are we called to do? What makes our heart sing? What is our plumb line? How can we know if our vision is in alignment with God's vision for us?

These are orienting questions for us as individuals and for us as members of congregations and communities. God has not created any of us to be someone else. God has created us to be truly ourselves, to identify our strengths and limits, to align with our purpose, and steward the gifts and assets of all kinds entrusted to us. As Oscar Wilde put it, "Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken."

This pandemic that we are nearly on the other side of is still ravaging communities elsewhere, including just to our south in Cuba. As we discern together our next steps moving forward beyond the restrictions of COVID-19, millions of others face very different circumstances.

We are in a period of collective discernment as St Paul's, Key West. And we are fortunate to be able to claim this time to determine with intention what we are called to focus upon moving forward. What will we prioritize? Upon what in particular will we labor for the common good? As the mystical theologian Howard Thurman put it, *What will we authorize to be placed upon the altar of our own hearts?*

Dr Thurman illuminates this concept beautifully in his book entitled, *Meditations of the Heart*. I conclude with these words of his:

*"There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the 'angel with the flaming sword.' Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes 'the angel with the flaming sword' to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of 'the fluid area of your consent.' This is your crucial link with the Eternal."*