

Scripture

Amos 7:7-15

7 This is what he showed me: 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,

"See, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by;
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."

10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center 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, earn your 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 Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, 15 and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

Mark 6:14-29

The Death of John the Baptist

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It 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 Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When his daughter Herodias 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." 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Sermon: Saving Face

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

We begin with the story of Herod Antipas, and a little history lesson to help set the stage. Herod was the son of Herod the Great, who was the King of Judea after seizing control from Antigonas of the Hasmonians. We remember Herod the great as a rather bloodthirsty king – he was the one who killed off the infants of Bethlehem when he heard from the Magi that there had been a true king born in that place.

Soon after the slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, Herod the Great was poisoned and eventually he died. One of the main suspects in his assassination was his son, Herod Antipas, and indeed Herod Antipas was eventually convicted of killing his father. Herod wasn't even the oldest son; he wasn't first in line to become king, so poisoning his father was not a particularly smart move, but as we will see, Herod was no, and is not, known for his wisdom.

After the death of Herod Sr., Caesar Augustus had to step in and figure out what to do about the kingdom of Judea which was then without a leader. He ended up dividing the kingdom into four parts – a tetrarchy is what they called it, and Herod Jr. became the ruler of two provinces: Galilee and Perea.

Herod Jr. was a bloodthirsty and insecure ruler, much like his father. Knowing his own treachery, he trusted no-one and thought that most people were out to get him. Indeed, his very name – Antipas – means against all.

Herod portrayed a tough façade which seemed to cover for a core of weakness and insecurity. His weakness could be seen in how he treated John the Baptizer. Herod had stolen away his half-brother's wife and brought her home to be his own. John the Baptizer was not shy about condemning this relationship; he straight up called it unlawful, since this relationship was

founded on infidelity and a double divorce. This made the wife quite angry, and the scripture says she burned against John – a strong image. She wanted John dead. But, Herod wanted John alive. So as a compromise Herod imprisoned John, to shut him up. This kept John quiet and out of sight, and also served to protect John from Herod's wife who had not forgotten being called out on the carpet by him.

Herod was presented as a largely despicable and conniving man, though the fact that he did recognize John as righteous and holy redeems him somewhat. And although Herod didn't understand much of what John said, the text said he was often perplexed, yet he liked to listen to him talk, so this arrangement of keeping John in prison suited him quite well. He had his own private prophet sequestered away.

Now we move into the story of this morning. Herod was having a party, showing his friends what a powerful and important man he was, and in the course of this party he called for his daughter to dance for his guests. Dance she did, greatly pleasing her father and the others present – so much so that Herod promised to give her anything she asked for.

I don't imagine that this was a cute little kid's dance – no father offers to fulfill any desire of his daughter after a rendition of *I'm a little teapot*. It brings to mind a similar drunken party in the book of Esther, where King Ahasuerus commanded that his wife Queen Vashti come dance before him and his guests wearing nothing but a crown so he could show her off. Another insecure ruler who badly needed to impress his guests.

In a like manner, Herod demanded what could only have been a highly erotic dance from his daughter to impress all his courtiers, and to further wow them with his generosity he promised before everyone gathered that he would do anything for this girl who made him look so powerful and enviable to all those gathered. So he said to her 'Whatever you ask of me, I will give you, even up to half of my kingdom.'

This itself is somewhat ridiculous, remember that Herod was not actually a king, but a tetrarch - a ruler appointed by Rome over a quarter of a kingdom. He couldn't give her half the kingdom because it wasn't his to give away. But he needed to look good, so he made the promise.

Now, it would seem that the daughter had inherited some of her father's cunning, because when she heard the offer she didn't just blurt out the first thing that came to her mind, but went and conferred with her mother. This was a golden opportunity, and she didn't want to waste it on something frivolous.

It seemed as though her mother was just as insecure as Herod, for when she heard of this wonderful opportunity of her daughter's, all she could think about was being slighted by John the Baptizer, who was rotting away in prison for naming her marriage as illegitimate. And so she sent her daughter back to the party to ask for John's head on a platter.

The king was deeply grieved, we read; he liked this man John. But he was trapped by his own words. He didn't want to look bad in front of his guests by reneging on his offer, so he sent a soldier down to the dungeon to bring back the head of John the Baptizer, and so it was done.

A very disturbing story – of a weak, conniving ruler, his equally insecure wife, and poor John, whose problem was that he could only speak the truth. Herod was a fool. He only cared for what everyone else thought of him. All he did was to impress others. He wanted to inspire respect, fear, and envy from those around him, but he missed the mark.

Because Herod was merely an inflated ego who didn't want to lose face in front of his guests, his party ended with a man's head on a platter. I can't imagine that this inspired or impressed any of his guests, likely this was a dinner party that was talked about in hushed tones for years afterwards – indeed here we are talking about it nearly 2000 years later.

Herod was indeed a fool; he tried too hard to please and impress the people around him. He was all bluster and show. All mouth and no trousers, as my friend across the square would say.

Does that sound like anybody today? Is it possible that Herod had an orange comb-over? Certainly there are some strong parallels between Herod and Trump. Herod spoke off the cuff, and became trapped by his own words. He made a promise to his daughter, and when it came time to fulfill that promise, even though it was clearly not good for anyone there, he was forced to follow through so as not to save face.

This is a pattern with the American president – he makes statements that he thinks will gain him support, such as getting tough with his trading partners. When it comes time to implement those words, however, it turns out that imposing punishing tariffs is bad for American workers and consumers, bad for the economies of various nations around the world, and bad for the American economy as well. Nobody wins, and yet he continues to act because he is bound by his own rhetoric, and his fear of losing face is greater than his concern about hurting other people.

I've been picking on Trump a little over the last few weeks, mostly because he's such easy prey, and far enough removed that few in this congregation will get overly upset over my observations, but the truth is that there are examples of this kind of pandering much closer to home.

The Ford administration in Ontario is doing much the same thing. There were plenty of promises made during the election campaign about eliminating the cap and trade emissions program, reworking various green energy programs, repealing the new sexual education curriculum in schools, and figuring out how to deal with the increasing number of asylum seekers crossing the border from the States.

Now that Ford is in office he is following through on these promises in a 'bull in the china shop' sort of way. Instead of studying issues and coming up with new plans, he is simply throwing things out the door as he settles into his new office.

Like Herod, Ford is not so much concerned with doing the right thing, the best thing, or the wise thing. He's just doing what he said he would do.

As I've watched political power change between the parties at the provincial and federal levels over my lifetime I'm struck by how predictable the whole process seems to be. When the Liberals get into power there seems to be a string of broken promises – there always seems to be a reason that they often don't do what we elected them to do – electoral reform is the big broken promise for the federal Liberals. Once they're elected they acquire selective amnesia about the promises they've made.

The Conservatives are the opposite, but it seems to take us by surprise. Think of Mike Harris and Doug Ford – they get control and drive ahead full steam and we're left looking at the carnage and saying 'well I didn't think they'd actually do those things they said.' We've all had one of those kind of dumb friends that we could always convince to jump off a roof, run into a fence, or eat a bug. They'll do any dumb thing if they think people will like it. That's who we just elected to run Ontario. That's Trump. That's Herod. All of the populist leaders that are popping up across the free world are all types that promise to give people what they want, regardless of how damaging it may be. They're all bug eaters.

Needless to say, I'm not a fan of any political party – I dismiss them equally. I wish we could all just vote for the candidate that seems most honest and most sensible and leave it at that, but now I'm digressing.

Back to Herod, the fool. The dangerous fool. The reason that Herod was a fool, like many of the populist political leaders that we are seeing these days, was that he chose the wrong standard by which to measure himself. Herod measured his worth by what he thought other people thought of him.

The problem with worrying too much what other people think is that public opinion is generally quite fickle and shallow. We blow this way and that, often on the most miniscule of whims. Especially in this past year we have seen how quickly people can fall from grace – one day we think they're decent people – role models even - the next day we see those same people as monsters because of something revealed from their past.

If you rate yourself based on what you believe other people think of you, you will always be frantic and insecure, because you will be living on a razor's edge. Herod gained political power by killing his father. He got his wife by betraying his brother. Herod would certainly be well aware that all his power, prestige, and wealth could be taken from him in a moment – everything that he gained through devious scheming could be lost to another the very same

way. That's why he was so insecure, and that's why he was so easily manipulated into doing something terrible.

So, if we are not to measure ourselves by the standard of public opinion, what then is our standard?

In the Hebrew Testament reading Amos had a vision in which God was holding a plumb line. A plumb line is a string with a weight on the end – it is used to show whether something is truly vertical or not. God was holding this line against a wall – testing it to see if it was true. It is a symbol of measurement – of judgement.

What then, is the plumb line that God uses? By what are we judged; what is our standard?

The wall that God was measuring was originally built using a plumb line, the text said. God was testing the wall to see if it still measured up to its original specifications. Using this analogy, our plumb line, the thing that measures us, must be something used back in our original creation. Something that still exists today, to be held up beside us for comparison.

There is one thing that was around back then and is still around today. Through him all things were made; nothing has been made without him. Jesus. The meaty part of the Trinity.

Jesus was fully God, present before creation and intimately involved in creation.

Yet Jesus was fully human. We like to think that fully human means that he was 100% like us. That's not what it means. We are not fully realized human beings.

When I was young, a comment that I consistently got on my report cards was 'Mikal is not living up to his full potential.' I was a smart student, but I only did as much as I had to, to keep myself near the top of the pack. I never really applied myself.

That also applies to us as a race. Human beings are not living up to our full potential. There's no need to be offended; deep down we all know it's true. We're a fallen race. We make mistakes. We also purposely cut corners, slack off, and do things we know are wrong.

So, when Jesus is described as being fully human, it doesn't mean that Jesus is fully human just as we are. It means that Jesus is fully human in a way that we are not.

Jesus is the plumb line. Jesus is the standard by which we are measured. Jesus was our original blueprint. Jesus is also our ultimate end. As we are grafted onto the vine and grow in the Spirit we become more and more one with Christ, until at the end, we appear indistinguishable from Christ, before God, at the seat of judgement.

We do not gain our worth and life by seeking other people's favour like Herod. Becoming what we think other people want, or what we think will impress other people, will never give us any value. That turns us into despicable human beings who ultimately stand for nothing.

Our worth and our life is gained by becoming Jesus. He is our measure. So what does that look like?

First of all, Jesus didn't care what other people thought. He was a fool in other's eyes. He ate with non-Jews which was a big no-no in his time. He talked with women in public places. He touched lepers. He challenged the respectable people, the ones with power, and told them they were wrong.

He didn't care what the rich and powerful people thought of him. He defied the social conventions of his day, and even seemed to go out of his way to provoke those around him.

Herod was obsessed with looking good, and didn't realize he was a fool. Jesus knew full well that he appeared the fool to many of those around him, but was not concerned with their opinions – he cared about God's opinion only.

That is not to say that he didn't care about people – nobody has cared about people more than Jesus, but he wasn't concerned with his reputation or his image. Jesus has enough wisdom that he is not afraid to appear foolish to the world, because the ways of the world are themselves foolishness.

And as Christ's followers, we should not be concerned with looking like fools either. We shouldn't be worried about talking to the wrong kinds of people, because they are the ones who need Jesus most. We shouldn't be worried about having an unpopular opinion in our culture where anything goes – truth is truth, denying reality is what makes us fools like Herod.

We are not called to appear wise, we are to actually be wise. We are not called to appear loving, but to actually be loving. We are not called to appear to be God's people, but we are to actually be God's people, and that means that we will occasionally embarrass ourselves, but in doing so we become real people. It's not terribly popular these days to be God's people, to wear the cross, but that is who we are. We are fools for Christ. We are fools like Christ.

I got business cards printed a little while back. They don't say reverend, or minister on them. My job title reads 'Fool for Christ.'

You see, it is only once we have embraced the fact that we don't live to impress others but to emulate Christ are useful to God. Pride has to get out of the way, and then God is able to work through us.

St Paul writes of it like this: Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God

chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. We have no grounds to boast in ourselves and how we look to others; our car, house, career or social position, but instead 'let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

Amen.