

“How Lovely are the Messengers?”

Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29; Psalm 85:8-13; 7-16-06

Some time ago, the choir sang a lovely little section from Felix Mendelssohn’s “St. Paul Oratorio” for us. The portion it shared with us is entitled, “How Lovely are the Messengers” and the words are these:

”How lovely are the messengers that bring us the gospel of peace!

To all the nations is gone forth the sound of their words,
throughout all the lands their glad tidings.”

(Romans 10:15,18)

As lovely as the messengers in the words of this song might be, messengers in real life are not always regarded as “lovely” or even as people who “bring us the gospel of peace.”

Have you ever noticed how well intentioned people, who seek to bring messages to others, are sometimes shot by those who cannot or will not hear the message? Think of those scientists and others who have been warning us of global warming for years. They have tried only to awaken and inform us but they have been shot at and their message denied over and over again. Meanwhile, the temperature of our world rises.

Of course, you have seen this in other instances. I have, too. There have been those times when some of us have been those doing the shooting and times when some of us have been those on the receiving end of the bullets. What can I tell, you?—that’s life.

These happenings have been facts of life almost since the beginning of time. But, these facts became clearer during the age of the Old Testament prophets when there were targets aplenty.

The nation Israel could not grasp the message from God the prophets tried to deliver. It’s as if the entire nation was dense. So, they would half hear and pay lip service for a while to the God of Israel but, after a while, they would turn their backs and go on their own way.

God was infinitely patient, most of the time. But, in our reading from the prophet Amos, we can see that God’s patience had worn at least a little thin. God told Amos that enough was enough—the nation was so warped that there was no redemption for it. It was out of plumb. If you have ever tried to wallpaper a room that is out of plumb you know how serious this can be. Because the nation had become so messed up it would be destroyed for choosing to ignore or even distort God’s message. Amos, a simple man, sought to share this information. He denounced Israel, as well as its neighbors, for relying on military might, and for grave injustice in social dealings, abhorrent immorality, and shallow, meaningless piety. His message was not one of hope and promise for the future. His message was one that offered only destruction. We can only imagine how welcome he was as he moved through the nation sharing God’s word. He was even told to go away and take his prophecies elsewhere.

Skipping through time, we come across another prophet, one from the New Testament, known as John the Baptist. He is thought to have been Jesus’ cousin. He was the one in scripture who went before Jesus preparing the way. He knew that someone greater was coming to help people on their journey through life. But while he was foretelling the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, he ran afoul of the ruling hierarchy. He had the audacity to call a spade a spade when he told King Herod that he had broken the law by marrying Herodias, his sister-in-law. Herod respected John as a holy man and protected him. But Herodias was of a different mind. She could not bear the truth and plotted to have the messenger destroyed. John was beheaded. When Jesus appeared on the scene, Herod was sure John had come back to life—how scary was that? Herod had problems with this.

As time moved on and the church began to take form, so many messengers were being picked off as the Christian message began to spread from place to place that it was necessary to broaden the base of involvement. Paul was one of the agents of this change. He understood that the good news of Christ needed far more people involved in its spread if it was going to survive.

This morning's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, begins with a prayer of thanksgiving and for spiritual wisdom. Just a few verses following this it is noted that the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, are called to be messengers. This was a good thing—the more messengers there were the greater likelihood one would evade those determined to shoot them. So the base of support grew and grew and enough made it through the lines of fire so that the message remains to this day. It is up to those of us who go on, messengers in a different way, to continue the work begun so very long ago.

For all of us are the present-day messengers bringing with us the gospel of peace and love, patience and understanding. All of us. When we bow to any other way of life, we fail our calling. And, all of us fail from time to time, not one is immune to human nature. But as the little quote reminds us: “To err is human, to repent divine, to persist devilish.” To persist in the error of our ways is to give in to the dark side of life that feeds our selfish needs and desires and causes us to block out all the messengers of truth who have come to us through the days and nights of our lives offering to show us the way of decent living. It causes us to forget the message Christ gave us in regard to human relationships and makes us mean spirited, jealous, and, at the very least, neglectful of others. We become the messengers of negativity. We become out of plumb. We become warped in our perceptions of life and the way in which we address it and others who are around us.

The best way we can defeat our warped ways of viewing and responding to the life all around, is to stop and reflect on how it is we respond to life. We each are responsible for the course we take. No one else can control how we live and move and have our being or even how we feel. It doesn't matter what garbage we take in, what matters is what we make of all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Do we pass the trash on? Or do we act in a mature way and make gold out of it? The choice is always ours. Each of us has been given the wonderful gift of free will; it has been trusted to us by a God who believes we have the ability to choose and act wisely. We must continue to live and grow into an understanding of the life we are to follow so that we never let down the one who made us, ourselves and others. We must learn to listen to the messengers that still come to us from days of old and from the present to offer words of wisdom and direction without taking up arms to resist and defeat them. We never know when it is we will be given messages of peace and love that will last a lifetime. Amen