

“Warning and Promise”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
19th Sunday after Pentecost – 11 October 2009
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

One Christmas while serving as a Canon at the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, the Dean presented each canon with four beautiful Henckel knives. Taped to the front of the package was a verse from today’s reading of Hebrews: “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” I have greatly enjoyed those knives over the past several years, but with my fellow canons, I remain puzzled whether that scripture verse was attached as a joke or something more meaningful.

Certainly, the author of Hebrews meant it as no joke. Scripture pierces straight to the heart of who we are. It can lay us bare, cutting finer than the most honed fillet knife. The Bible offers comfort, yet may also disturb. However, only a few verses later, we read “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” How odd the contradiction: a warning of the sharpness of scripture, followed by encouragement that we belong to God and are made worthy to stand upright before Him, thanks to the sacrifice made for us by Jesus. We heed the warning. We celebrate the promise, and that’s the way it goes as we walk the Way of faith.

Likewise with Amos, the fire-breathing prophet, who excoriates corrupt judges and the unscrupulous rich people who exploited them by bribing their way to victory in civil cases, abusing the rights of orphans and widows, weak vulnerable people deprived of necessities to sate the luxurious appetites of a few. It was so disgusting, no wonder Amos was angry, along with

the God who called him to prophesy. Of course, it was not just the indulgent wealthy or select members of the judiciary who would suffer the punishment. No doubt there were some people not directly involved or directly affected who might have held those crooks accountable, but they remained silent. The people of Israel enjoyed a covenant with God as a people, and they would be disciplined as a people by conquest, impoverishment, slavery, and exile. This is what Amos predicted. This is what occurred.

However, like all prophets, Amos was not purely a figure of gloom and doom. Prophets are people of hope. Otherwise, why would they bother? If there was no hope of repentance, why go to the trouble of speaking uncomfortable, unpopular truths? If there was no hope of redemption, why warn people to change their ways? “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” Every prophet held out the promise of return from exile, the promise of reconciliation with God, or restoration of what had been lost by bad choices but redeemed by God’s mercy and by the penitence of a people who learned the hard way the consequences of injustice and greed.

We hear the same sort of prophetic doublet coming from the lips of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Approached by a young man well-versed in scripture and meticulously observant of the Law, Jesus told him to sell all he had, give the money to the poor, and follow him. The young man was disconcerted, because he was exceptionally wealthy. He likely had commitments and responsibilities that made him wary of divesting himself of all his assets. What would happen to his family members and his employees, who depended upon his accumulated wealth for their livelihoods? He went away despondent, surprised and unhappy with what Jesus said.

Then Jesus turned to the disciples and told them that it would be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. There’s been quite

a controversy about whether Jesus was talking about stuffing a smelly, sure-footed dromedary through a simple sewing apparatus, or if that image was a colloquial expression for getting a fully-loaded camel through a particularly narrow gate in Jerusalem's wall known as the Needle. I think Jesus was probably clever enough for *double entendre*, even though the French weren't around to coin that phrase yet. Whatever the case, here's a clear warning that someone who wants to follow Jesus and receive eternal life better be ready to give up everything.

Stunned by his statement, the disciples begin to despair, wondering, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus replied, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God, for God all things are possible." Just as with Hebrews and Amos, the warning is swiftly followed with words of promise. Harshness is succeeded by hope.

This pattern repeats itself so frequently in scripture, because it strikes at the very heart of reality. In every age, things have not been as they ought to have been. The strong have taken advantage of the weak. Those who have plenty discover that enough never is. People get distracted from following God, by their fears and their obsessions and their comforts. People stop relying on God and stop keeping the sacred covenant we share with God. Bad things happen. People realize that moral decay spreads to every form of power, opening vulnerabilities, causing problems. We do better for a while, and then the cycle repeats itself again. Any student of history can see this.

Yet we alone will never create justice and freedom and peace untainted by wrong, oppression, and violence. We are foolish to think for a moment that we can. But the good news is that God always stands ready to help. God always wants to remedy our personal and societal disease, because God loves us more than we could ever know. And therein lay our hope.

We can endure the sharp scripture that sometimes slices the soul and exposes our shame, because we know that through Christ, the Way has been opened for us to approach the mercy seat of God. We can hear prophetic truth, renewed from age to age, and summon the courage to utter, “Amen,” when those who thwart the common good are called to account, because we know that God is eagerly waiting for us to turn from what threatens to destroy us and return to the ways that give life and health and peace.

We can listen to Jesus demand everything from us, because we know that we don’t have everything to give. What we consider to be everything is like nothing compared to what Jesus offers. And when we can’t handle letting go, God is willing to help.

That is good news when we flee study of scripture, because deep down we fear its power. It is good news in an age just as cynical, corrupt, and cash-crazy as every other, because we know that even if the worst happens, God has redeemed us and will never let us go. Today, we celebrate the good news that when we are trapped by stuff and prevented from following Jesus in the way that we want, what is impossible for us is possible for God.

However, the promise means nothing, if we ignore the warning, and the warning isn’t good news if we forget the promise, because in between the warning and the promise lay the truth about how things are, and how they are meant to be, and how they could be, if we cooperate with God to make his Kingdom alive on this Earth.

We heed the warning. We celebrate the promise. This is the Way that leads to eternal life. Amen.