

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Vicar]

Pastor, I've been having trouble with this week's texts. Could you help me out?

[Pastor]

Sure, what seems to be the problem?

[Vicar]

I'm not sure where to find any “Gospel” in these readings.

[Pastor]

What do you mean? The Good News of Jesus Christ is present in all three readings.

[Vicar]

Well, take the Old Testament reading:

God's prophet Amos gets ignored.

The Epistle reading has some Gospel in it,

but Paul is so wordy that we'd need a week just to make sense of it all.

The New Testament reading:

John gets beheaded.

Not exactly happy or comforting.

[Pastor]

Well, let's take a look. Start with the New Testament. Herod killed John.

Tell me what you know about Herod.

[Vicar]

Well, his name is Herod Antipas.

He was from a family of bloodthirsty Edomite usurpers to the Jewish throne.

And they were all named Herod.

His father was Herod *the Great*, the most prolific builder of all time. He built:

- *The Second Temple*—the biggest structure in the world until the 1800s,
- *The Herodium*—literally moving a mountain,
- *The Fortress Palaces at Masada*—bringing water into the desert just because he could, Oh, and he was also the Herod who tried to kill the baby Jesus.

When that Herod died, the Herod from today's reading (Herod Antipas) fought off the other Herods for the throne. He killed many of his own family, including at least one of his ten *known* wives and some children.

Then he conspired with his half-brother's wife (who also happened to be his half-niece, born from his *other* brother) to leave her husband and marry him instead. (She may also have been married to another Herod in between.)

The wife's name was Herodias. (Even the women had the same name, apparently.) It was her idea to behead John the Baptist because he had the gall to publicly denounce her marriage as sinful. She wanted to ‘save face.’

(Mark 6:19)

But sinners can't help but drag the next generation into sin, so Herodias had her daughter, Salome, be the one to ask for John's head. (Salome would later marry her grand-uncle Philip the Tetrarch, because these Herods were crazy.)

(Mark 6:24)

How'd I do?

[Pastor]

Vicar, you got the Seminarian knowledge.

Now think like a pastor: Why did these sinners continue to live in their sin?

[Vicar]

I suppose... they may have *liked* doing evil. Getting themselves entangled in their web of sin. But few people consciously think themselves evil.

So it is likely that things spiraled out of control. They sinned once, were ashamed, then tried to 'save face.' Just *once*, but one thing led to another. They probably didn't want anyone to know just how evil and *alone* they really were.

[Pastor]

Exactly.

[Vicar]

Right... so where's the Gospel?

[Pastor]

Beheaded! John didn't merely preach *against* the copious sins committed by all those Herods; John preached *repentance!* (Mark 1:4)

John preached the Good News that all sinful 'Herods' could receive forgiveness if only they would repent. If only they would turn back toward God.

The same is true for us 'Herods' today. "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...*"

[Vicar]

"...*But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:9)

That *is* Good News!

And yet... The Herods never repented—not that we know of, anyway. If we preach about the Herods, it will simply be a cautionary tale.

Will people repent of their sins if they hear it?

[Pastor]

Maybe the Old Testament reading can help them understand where repentance comes from. What did Amos prophesy?

[Vicar]

He said "the high places" would be shattered; the false altars to false gods at cities like Bethel. Amos said God would show his power and shatter them. (Amos 7:9)

But that's not exactly Good News if I myself have false idols! Think about it. We know people struggle with false idols of addictions, 'pet sins'—even sins they might not admit are sins! We can't just crush them with God's Law!

[Pastor]

The Law must be preached, Vicar. Sometimes it crushes. Yes, the Law will *always* accuse; but the Law does not *only* accuse.

Take another look at what Amos said: *whose* "high places" would be shattered?

[Vicar]

Isaac's... Where are you going with this?

[Pastor]

Well, we usually hear "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" grouped together. Sometimes "Abraham" or "Children of Abraham" is used as a stand-in for the whole people of God. Same for "Jacob," or his other name "Israel."

But it's rare to see "Isaac." In fact, this is the *only* place in the entire Old Testament where God's people are called "Isaac."

Now, what do you make of that? What is Amos saying when he calls God's people "Isaac?"

[Vicar]

I was hoping you would tell me...
Well, "Isaac" means "laughter," so I suppose
this whole thing is one big cosmic joke.

[Pastor]

Try again...
What is Isaac's story?

[Vicar]

Ok, ok. Isaac was the son God had promised to
Abraham. Then God told Abraham to sacrifice
him—which is pretty shocking.

Many cultures in the area practiced child
sacrifice in those days. They offered up their
most prized possession—their children—to
appease bloodthirsty idols. But God's people
weren't supposed to do such an abominable
thing. Nonetheless, Abraham obeyed God's
apparently 'good' Law. (Genesis 22)

[Pastor]

And at the last second?

[Vicar]

At the last second, the Angel of the Lord stayed
Abraham's hand. In that very same moment, a
ram was caught in a thicket by its horns. So God
provided the sacrifice. (Genesis 22:14)

[Pastor]

Ah-ha!

[Vicar]

Ah-ha?

[Pastor]

Ah-ha! Amos prophesied that God would not
sacrifice His people! Instead, God would
sacrifice His *own* Son. This is the Good News
that all the rest of the scriptures are built upon.

This forgiveness is for anyone who repents!

[Pastor]

And here is where Paul's Epistle reading ties it
all together:

"In him you also,
when you heard the word of truth,
the gospel of your salvation,
and believed in him,
were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit."
(Ephesians 1:13)

Forgiveness is not only given by God, but
promised by God! Christians are sealed with
that promise of the Holy Spirit at baptism.
They are "His people."

[Vicar]

You know what?
That's some Good News.

[Pastor]

Amen! And that Good News is present in
every one of today's readings.

[Vicar]

So it is. You know, it occurs to me that Amos
provides a joyful example for us to follow.

[Pastor]

Oh, yes. We can't forget the rest of Amos'
story!

A rival prophet, Amaziah, wanted Amos exiled.
According to Amaziah, Amos didn't have the
pedigree to be a prophet of God. (Amos 7:10-13)

Amaziah, on the other hand, was an educated
and well-to-do expert. So when Amaziah
confronted Amos about his preaching of
repentance, Amos answered:

*"I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I
was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs.
But the Lord took me from following the flock,
and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my
people Israel.'"* (Amos 7:14-15)

[Vicar]

It was the Lord who called Amos.
It was the Lord who called John.
It was the Lord who calls us today.

[Pastor]

Yes! God called Amos out of the sinful people
to proclaim the Good News of repentance, just
as God calls *all* people out of this sinful world
through the Good News of Jesus Christ.

[Vicar]

And he calls all of us together to:

**Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among the people. Amen! (Psalm 96:3)**
