

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## YOU FEEL ME?

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost

July 11, 2021

AMOS 7:7-15 | PSALM 85:8-13

EPHESIANS 1:3-14 | MARK 6:14-29

The unsurpassable Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote the classic two volume work on the biblical prophets that is still studied today by every priest, pastor and rabbi I have ever met. At one point he states simply: A prophet is one who feels the feelings of God and shares it with others. The prophet does not so much speak for God as to remind the people what God has said and his very real presence with them. Even and especially in times of judgement.

The prophet Amos was not the only one upset that King Jeroboam had built high places to the Lord, alternative centers of worship outside of Jerusalem, to draw the northern tribes of Israel into idolatry. His vision of a plum line resting up against a wall is not so much an oracle, as it is a set piece to let God tell us how God feels about such carelessness.

John the Baptist was not the only one scandalized by Herod Antipas' putting away of his wife, and his brother, and marrying his brother's wife. No doubt Jesus thought the same. As much as Herod would like to act like a roman ruler, Romans surely saw it as another sign of the weakening of legitimate authority in Palestine. Herod it seems had doubts himself. Mark tells us he was enthralled with Jesus. He protected John as long as he could. But clearly, Herod was not in control of his own house, much less the country.

When we listen to the prophets, we can get caught up in the world historical, political intrigue of the events – or we can listen for the heart of God. We listen to the heart of God, when we are listening to plain truths being spoken. We can hear God's passion for his people, his steadfast love most often when someone gives voice to the voiceless, throws light on the injustices mindlessly inflicted on the poor, and speaks up for those who have no one to defend them.

The prophet speaks. God says: I feel you. You feel me?

This is why Abraham, the knight of faith, is also called the first prophet in bible. He heard God's call to leave his country and believe in a promise. He felt God's desire to find a way out of the fruitlessness of selfish disobedience and the endless chaos created by humanity's search for empire, to rule others. He not only knew it as a fact, but he staked his life on the feeling that God had a plan for the whole human race. "I will make you not only a great nation, but all the nations, all the inhabitants of the earth will be blessed through you." You feel me?

By their manner of living, both Amos and John signal that they are solely concerned to approach the heart of God. We can imagine John asking for nothing, or locusts and wild honey, locked away in prison. When Amaziah, the high priest at Bethel, tells Amos to go home and make his living back down in Judah, Amos replies: I didn't

do this for fame or financial gain. I'm not really even a prophet. I make a living like most of the rest of you. "I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

God said: go tell the people how I feel. We'll find out soon enough whether Amos' little prediction of their defeat and exile will come true. What matters is that: "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by". Who they worship and how they do it is crucial. The idolatry must stop. You feel me?

In fact, this phrase, 'you feel me, ' has entered into the English language in just the sense we need to understand today. It is often said in a moment of intimacy, one on one. 'You feel me? Yeah, I feel you.' Yet, the implication is always that the individuals are in tune with something much larger happening, something about to reveal itself on a grand scale - something that has nothing to do with feelings, but with what we once un-ironically called facts, with realities that cannot be sidestepped or ignored.

A prophet is one who takes the time to learn how God feels, and on a broader canvas is invited to share it. A prophet gives voice to the voiceless, points out the injustice done to the poor and defenseless. The prophet will walk up to a priest or a king and say what everyone else knows needs to be said.

Jesus has just noted that a prophet is no without honor - except in his hometown. A prophet is often blamed for stating the obvious that everyone can see, but no one, for various reasons, wants to pay attention to.

The plum-line is a tool of construction. So is concrete reinforced with steel bars. One hundred years ago, much to every architects delight, a brilliant female engineer realized you could put steel bars in concrete and create the most versatile, flexible tool for building as tall as you want. It will expand in the summer and contract in the winter, keeping its magical shape. The only problem is that water finds a way. Steel rusts.

A plum-line can tell you if a wall is straight. It can tell you perhaps, if the walls of your condominium are tilting, if they are cracking. The engineer can issue a report. City managers can know full well that every building built in the last 100 years of reinforced steel concrete will have to be repaired and restored because, as magical as this method of construction is, every engineer and every city manager knows full well that steel rusts, reinforced concrete will eventually decay, and left alone, the buildings will fall down. Never mind there might be corruption. There is this greater reality.

Jesus has just sent out his disciples, two by two, to do what he came to do, to proclaim the kingdom of God, to let the people know that God is on their side and is with them in their struggle. They will hear of John's shameful death. They will wonder what awaits their master. They will realize that, come what may, God's kingdom cannot be stopped.

Their hearts are broken as they hear of John's disciples going to collect his body, take back his head from atop the platter, to honor him as a true prophet. They will soon return from their mission to tell of the power of God that works through them in Jesus' name. They will see how absurd every king's boast is of his fleeting empire. They will remember that God judges those who turn from his heart and worship false gods.

They will know each day more and more of the heart of God, even on that day when they follow their own master to the foot of the cross, they will learn more and more of God's undying love for his people, especially the voiceless and the defenseless.

And they will hear God say: Fear not. I feel you. You feel me?