

HOW DO YOU RANK?

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Grace Church in New York
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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. (Amos 7:7-8)

Today’s readings from the Book of Amos and the Gospel of Mark both speak to the pitfalls of being a king, and how hard it is to leave a good legacy. Coincidentally, in late June the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network – otherwise known as C-Span – released the results of their presidential ranking survey. What they did was ask 142 presidential historians to score the leadership qualities of the forty-four individuals who have completed their terms of occupying the highest office in the United States. “Forty-four,” you ask? Yes, forty-four, even though Joseph Biden is the 46th president. Fun fact: Grover Cleveland served two non-consecutive terms, making one person the 22nd and 24th presidents. Apparently, C-Span is just one of many organizations to rank the presidents. But no matter who conducts the survey, the top three and the bottom three usually consist of the same six names.

So who are the top three US presidents? It should come as little surprise. Number-one is always Abraham Lincoln, who ended slavery and won the Civil War. Number-two is George Washington, the first president who set the tone for all who would follow him. Number-three is Franklin D. Roosevelt, who pulled the nation out of the Great Depression and mobilized the country to fight and win the Second World War. As for the bottom of the barrel, the lowest of the low is always Lincoln’s predecessor, James Buchanan, whose leadership threw gasoline on the fire that would become the raging inferno of the Civil War. The next worst is Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, a disastrously incapable, mean-spirited leader who set back the gains of the Civil War and breathed new life into the defeated south. Third-worst honors always go to Franklin Pierce, Buchanan’s predecessor, who also got it wrong on slavery and started brushfires that would grow into the Civil War.

What of the remaining thirty-eight who have completed their terms, including the five former presidents who are still living? Will I weigh in on any of them? I will not! To avoid generating any unnecessary sparks, I will simply say that they are all somewhere in the middle. Indeed, historians have set a plumb line in the midst of US presidents, and I will leave it to you to look up the survey online and see for yourself the ranking that each one received.

In today’s Old Testament reading from Amos (7:7-15) we meet a king who received a ranking. Jeroboam II was King of Israel, the northern ten tribes of the Hebrew people, about eight centuries before Jesus. By all earthly standards Jeroboam was a successful king. For 41 years his reign had brought prosperity to Israel. It was a time of peace, the military was strong, the borders were secure, even expanding. The arts flourished, the people raised up great buildings, and many were enjoying a life of unprecedented affluence. Jeroboam also led a spiritual revival. Under his rule worshipping the God of Israel with great festivals became all the rage. So Jeroboam II could be confident that history would smile upon his legacy, and that even God would rank him highly amongst the kings of Israel.

Little did Jeroboam know that his approval ratings were in and about to be released. The numbers weren’t good. Amos, a newly minted prophet from the southern kingdom of Judah had come to town and claimed that he’d seen a vision of a plumb line set in the midst of Israel. The purpose of a plumb line is much the same as a carpenter’s level. So God had set a carpenter’s level

in the midst of Israel, and Amos had the job of reading it. He declared that the kingdom was out of kilter, and the whole premise of Jeroboam's reign was flawed. Beneath the surface of Israel's prosperity the legal system was corrupt and fueled by bribery. A huge chasm separated the poor and the wealthy. The spiritual revival amounted to nothing more than raucous crowds playing church at festival time. What is more, Amos warned that the giant nation of Assyria was on the move again and Israel wasn't paying attention. A national disaster was looming and Jeroboam II was merely hoping it would go away.

The words of Amos must have stunned King Jeroboam and his priest Amaziah. But would they be able to hear what the Lord God was saying? They would not. They dismissed the messenger who would dare speak truth to power. *Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel."* In other words, thanks for the prophecy, Amos, but 41 years of peace and prosperity should count for something. Take your visions of plumb lines dancing in your head and run along home to nasty little Judah. Unfortunately for Jeroboam, chasing away Amos would not save his legacy. In fact, if anyone remembers anything about him at all, it's that he was the king who failed the test of the plumb line.

Eight centuries later another prophet would arise to speak to another king. This time the king was Herod Antipas, who was the son of Herod the Great. If you recall, Herod the Great was King of Judea when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. When Herod died his remaining sons inherited smaller portions of the kingdom to rule. Herod Antipas, whom we meet in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (6:14-29), was one of them. This is the Herod who presided over the death of John the Baptist, and later Jesus. Herod Antipas had a legitimacy problem in the eyes of the people. He wanted to be hailed as a great king anointed by God to rule God's people. He wanted to be a builder, as was his father, even a builder of the temple. He wanted to be a temple figure, which meant that he probably wouldn't have corrected you if called him the Messiah. But if Herod had any messianic pretensions, he would have to follow the Law of Moses to the last letter, and this he did not do. Herod fell in love with Herodias, his brother's wife. So he divorced his own wife and married his brother's wife. Such an illegitimate arrangement completely drained his credibility in the public eye. It also provoked a border dispute with his ex-wife's father, who was a neighboring king. It was a mess – a political, spiritual, and personal mess.

John the Baptist feared no mess, and even discerned God's call to wade into muddy waters. John railed against Herod's new marriage – a marriage that flew in the face of the Mosaic Law. Strangely, Herod liked John. Mark reports that Herod thought John to be a holy and righteous man. John's words perplexed Herod, but Herod enjoyed listening. Reading between the lines of today's reading from Mark, it's almost as if Herod toyed with living out what the Lord God was saying through John. We can see how he might have come to his senses and repented. But in the end he did not. And so, as we heard in the Gospel of Mark, Herod did more than dismiss the messenger. He killed the messenger. It was off with John the Baptist's head.

What does all this have to do with you and me? Frankly, John the Baptist's head on a platter seems completely out of place on a sleepy summer morning. What is more, holding up Amos' plumb line feels like taking your bathroom scale along on vacation. Prophets are bearers of bad news. Who needs them? Where is the love? Where is the grace of our lord Jesus Christ? Well, as hard as it is to hear sometimes, the prophetic word, judgmental though it may be, is in itself a sign of God's love. Parents who fail to correct and rebuke their children who are running dangerously astray are guilty of neglect. Conversely, a sign of parental love is the willingness to be unpopular, to bear bad news, to judge, to guide along right pathways even in the face of opposition. So the prophetic word is the speaking of God's truth, born out of God's love. If Good Friday is our rejection of God's truth, then Easter Day is God's promise to keep coming back at

us for the salvation of our souls. Even Herod glimpsed something of God's unstoppable love when he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

So John prefigured Jesus. Jesus is the plumb line. Jesus is the plumb line set in the midst of your life and mine. I don't suspect that anyone within earshot of this sermon is a king, or a queen, or a future president. But all of us, individually, are stewards of our own lives, responsible for the decisions we make and the legacies that we leave. The question that haunts me is whether or not I am growing into the full stature of Christ. Am I allowing the Spirit of the living God to fashion me into the likeness of Christ, or am I insisting on my own way? The Psalmist declared, *I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him.* Am I listening to what the Lord God is saying? How do I rank?

On Friday of this week I embarked on a bike ride, as I often do, up to Central Park and around the loop a few times. I do it not only to clear my head but also to justify the calories I've eaten that I ought not to have eaten. On the first lap, as I came around the southern portion of the park I heard some loud singing. I looked and there on the grass about twenty feet in from the road was a woman serenading all who passed by with a version of Frank Sinatra's famous song, *I Did it My Way*. She was really belting it out at the top of her lungs so that no one could miss it. Nevertheless, I was trying to make good time so I was quickly out of earshot and thought nothing of it. But then I came around again (20-minutes later) and she was still going strong with what must have been the fourth or fifth rendition of the same song, *I Did it My Way*.

This time as I pedaled on I pondered the meaning of the experience. Mind you, I was neither judging the musical merits of her performance, nor even wondering what "it" was she was so proud of doing her very own way that caused her to burst into song. Rather, it was the lyrics of the song itself, which I have always taken to be a remarkably sinful ballad of defiant self-reliance to the point of self-worship. It is a stubborn rejection of advice and counsel, especially from "those who kneel." Really, I thought, "when the end comes near and the final curtain falls," it's not the song you want to be singing to Almighty God.

Back in my office again I returned to the preaching task that awaited me, and began zeroing in on the presidential rankings. I read further about the legacies of those at the top of the list and those at the bottom and I wondered about any common leadership traits they shared that resulted in their legacies, high or low. I am no presidential historian, but among the three at the bottom of the list I did notice something of a pattern. Words and phrases like "uncompromising," "stubborn," "unwilling to yield," "obstinate," and "oversized sense of self-importance" appeared again and again in the writings of those who assessed them. They did things their way. I imagined how all of them might have joined in with Kings Jeroboam, Herod Antipas, and the Central Park crooner in a rousing repetitive loop of *I Did it My Way*. Can you picture it? It would be quite an ensemble!

By contrast, today you and I have recited the song of the Psalmist (85:8): *I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him.* And in our closing hymn we will sing:

The light of truth to us display,
And make us know and choose thy way;
Plant holy fear in every heart,
That we from thee may ne'er depart.

Or try this: If you want to be valiant against all disaster, follow the Master – not the devices and desires of your own heart.