

Weekly Reading – Monday, July 6, 2009

Okay here's my take on the lessons for this coming Sunday, July 12, 2009. I'll make comments on both of the Old Testament options, the semi-continuous and the typological.

II Samuel 6: 1 - 5, 12b - 19

The story of David's rise to power continues, as David and his followers bring the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem. The noted and notable feature of this story is that David danced. Danced his fool head off. Twice we are told that David "danced before the Lord with all his might." That is to say, this was no stately Virginia Reel, but something closer to a break dancing, hip hop boogie. This sort of thing, joy before the Lord, always seems to draw some in while it puts others off. Such was the case here as Saul's daughter, Michal, looked on with complete disgust. In verses after the pericope Michal verbalizes her feelings to the young king. I am reminded of Luther's observation, "When the Word of God is alive, evil spirits are set in motion." In other words, no free lunches. Bright light sends some running for darkness. There is also the related theme of succession and how some can't let go and move on to the new thing God is doing. Perhaps in Michal's case, as daughter of Saul, one can understand. I suppose this text could be related to current battles in the church over music/ worship style. Relate it cautiously!

Amos 7: 7 - 15

A pivotal moment in the Book of Amos. Amos has a vision of the plumb line of judgment which the Lord drops in the midst of Israel. This is a people seriously "out of plumb" and God will act, casting down the mighty. But the court priest/ prophet, Amaziah, comes out to confront Amos, telling him to "go home." (Amos is the original "outside agitator" coming from the southern kingdom, Judah, to bring a word of judgment against the northern land, Israel.) "Go home," says Amaziah, "do your prophet thing there." Amos responds by denying that he is a prophet. He is, he says, only a gatherer of sycamore branches. He makes no lofty claim nor does he draw attention to himself. His only role is to declare the word he has heard. Such modesty ticks off Amaziah all the more. For Amaziah king and nation and "the American way of life" (so to speak) are ultimate, God's word must support that cause. Amos doesn't give a fig about the king or Israel's self-indulgent way of life. One doesn't hear many preachers these days who declare the Word of the Lord and damn the consequences. Doing so may result in working as a gatherer of sycamore branches!

Ephesians 1: 3 - 14

This is the first of a series of lessons from Ephesians that will continue well into August. Preachers may wish to do a series from this great letter in which Paul argues the cosmic and universal significance of what God has done in Christ. This reading constitutes the opening paragraphs of the letter. Note that Paul speaks of the Ephesians (or all the earlier believers) as being "destined." The same concept is echoed with "a plan for the fullness of time," and "marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." They are part of something great. Part of a great movement of God. God's planned destiny is unfolding for redemption. Calvin drew

upon such texts to develop his comments on "pre-destination." His teaching in that regard was not intended to divide people so much as to assure believers that the whole thing didn't depend on the quality of their faith or how they were feeling any given day. God is up to something here. Being destined, or pre-destined, means you can stop being so anxious and rest on the everlasting arms. Needless to say, "pre-destination" didn't work out that way in the hands of later Calvinists! But the whole business of destined, plan, unfolding purpose are a kind of welcome (in my view) antidote to the various American versions of Pelagianism, and all our anxious attempts to seize our salvation. Like Calvin, Paul wants his audience to be full of trust, not full of anxiety.

Mark 6: 14 - 29

This text would be what in movies is referred to as a "flashback." Amid rumors circulating about Jesus, there's speculation that he is John the Baptist, come back from the dead. Then we get the account of John's death. The Amos text has been chosen as a foil for this, with the message that being a prophet is a dangerous line of work. But there's an odd connection to the other Old Testament lesson, II Samuel. For here, as there, dancing plays a key part. In II Samuel we have David's joyous, uninhibited dancing. Here it's the real "dirty dancing," as Herodias' dancing so pleased Herod that he said, "Ask for anything you want and it's yours." Her request is ghastly: the head of John the Baptist on a platter. In the overall scheme of Mark's Gospel, the clouds are gathering ominously against Jesus. This is one really big thunderhead. What can/ should be said? That serving God doesn't mean that you'll be safe, secure, loved or famous? That without a cross there's no crown? That truth-telling is a dangerous business? You pick. It does seem to me that a good bit of contemporary preaching avoids anything "hard," in favor of comfort or merely human rhetoric and advice. Preachers can (and should) think carefully about what to say and how to say it, and should always hear the word of God's judgment directed at themselves too. But pulling all the punches all the time results in a church without substance, salt without savor.