

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Amos 7:12-15

Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:7-13

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When I was a kid, full-page ads used to appear in my comic books promoting an annual competition for high school students, sponsored by a prestigious-sounding scientific foundation. Each year, young people were invited to try to solve a major problem, like the storage of electricity, or the desalinization of seawater. According to the ads, the “solutions” that the students submitted would be studied carefully by experts in the appropriate field. Apparently, by means of this competition, the scientists at the foundation were not trying merely to popularize science or to encourage young scientists. Rather, their hope each year was that some of the young people would make significant contributions in the area being considered. The idea was that because the students were unschooled in the conventional wisdom of the subject, they would bring a fresh perspective to the question, and so might have a blinding insight that was beyond the reach of the experts.

Something like this is going on in our Old Testament reading. Amos admits he’s not a prophet. He doesn’t come from a family of prophets. The only qualifications he has are as a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees. Nevertheless, God has granted him an insight about the monarchy that has been denied to all the official prophets in the king’s court. The problem Amos has, is that no one will listen to him.

Similarly, in our Gospel, the twelve people Jesus sends out to

proclaim the good news hardly qualify as prophets or teachers. They are, instead, tax collectors and fishermen and other unprepossessing persons. Jesus warns them, that like Amos, they are going to have a hard time getting people to listen to them. Nevertheless, these unlikely apostles have been blessed with a blinding insight about God, and God's relationship with us. And everything depends on people's willingness to hear and embrace the truth, when it's presented to them in an unlikely guise.

So, a gangly teenager may solve a technical problem that has stumped the experts. A tender of sycamores may be chosen to convey the truth to a king. Fishermen with dusty sandals may proclaim the reign of God. In such a world, where might we turn to find life-giving wisdom? Someplace unexpected: Perhaps in an old person's oft-told tale, or in the words of someone whose politics or way of life we are tempted to abhor. Perhaps on the back of a garish holy card, or even toward the end of a particularly dull sermon. Perhaps in the breaking of bread.

These and other odd places would be typical of the God of surprises, who appeared among us as a carpenter's son -- someone who doubtless knew his way around a sycamore. May God fill us with the eagerness, the alertness, and the joy appropriate to the life of faith in such a world. God help us embrace the mystery.