

Sermon for Pentecost 6
July 12, 2009
Mark 6:14-29

Before becoming a pastor, Jim Batchelor was an engineer who had the opportunity to do some work for General Motors at their assembly plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan. They had to make changes to their assembly lines every year because of the new model changes. At the time, Jim and his team were checking out about six miles of newly installed overhead conveyors that moved car bodies from one area in the plant to another.

Of the event, Rev. Batchelor writes, “As was usual, we were behind schedule. In order to save time, they would often have crews removing old equipment at the same time that others were installing the new. Sometimes we worked pretty close to one another.

It was my job to supervise a group of workers and make it so that the equipment actually worked the way it was supposed to work. I shall probably never forget the first time I walked into the area around one of the work stations. I was walking along, minding my own business when someone grabbed me and held me back. It was very unnerving, but only for a short while. A few seconds later, I was very, very thankful.

You see, I was busy looking at the work station. I was not looking up at the ceiling. I didn’t know it, but, about twenty feet over my head, a team was taking down a very big piece of equipment with their handy-dandy cutting torches. A couple members of the team were walking around down on the main floor as safety observers. These safety observers were called spotters. They were watching for people just like me. About two seconds after one of the spotters grabbed me, a forty foot long I-beam with about a twelve inch web dropped down from the ceiling. If that spotter had not grabbed me, that I-beam would have ended my life instantly.

I remember experiencing about a dozen different emotions all at the same time. I was a little dazed and shocked. I was grateful to be alive. I was thankful for the quick actions of the spotter. I was frightened at the thought of what that I-beam could have done to me. I was also embarrassed. I felt stupid that I had not been more aware of my surroundings. It was a construction zone. I was wearing a hard hat for good reason. I should have been more careful. I made a mental note to be more careful in the future.

Did you know that the Bible also has spotters in it? Some of the spotters were called prophets. Others were called apostles. Both prophets and apostles act as spiritual spotters who warn people when they are about to get into spiritual danger. Today's Old Testament reading comes from the writings of one of those spiritual spotters, a prophet named Amos.

God chose Amos to warn Israel and other countries. Judging by his words in today's reading, he didn't really want to be a prophet. He didn't really want to be the one who told Israel what kind of danger they were in, but God chose him and he couldn't do anything about that.

In today's Gospel, we learn of another spotter sent to warn Herod of spiritual danger. John the Baptizer was the last of the Old Testament prophets. He was the forerunner of the Messiah. When Jesus talked about John, He said, ^[Luke 7:28] *“Among those born of women none is greater than John.”*

John was the spiritual spotter that God sent to Herod. Herod had stolen the wife of his brother. That and many other sins had placed his soul in danger. John the Baptizer warned Herod of this danger.

Our readings today tell us that there is one very obvious difference between the spotter who saved my life in that factory and spiritual spotters. Pastor Batchelor was very grateful to that spotter who kept him from walking under that I-beam in that factory. By the time, he recovered from seeing that big old I-beam crash in front of him, he was gone, but he was and continues to be very, very thankful that he was there at that time.

Spiritual spotters, on the other hand, often get no respect. The Israelites in the Old Testament reading wanted to send Amos into exile. Our Gospel tells us that Herod had John beheaded. The reward for warning someone of the danger to their soul may be verbal and physical abuse or even death.

God had told Amos to proclaim the many consequences of staying in their current situation of spiritual danger. Instead of listening to the warning that God gave through Amos and moving to the safety of God's salvation, they decided that Amos had to go. They suggested that he go to Judah and prophesy there.

In John's case, he warned Herod of the dangers of adultery. Marriage is not only the union of man and wife, but it is also a picture of the communion between Christ and His Bride, the Church. Herod not only sinned against marriage, but he also sinned against the very image that God established as a metaphor for His relationship with us. Herod was in danger of going to hell where his soul would be lost forever. Herod responded to this ministry by putting John's head on a platter and giving it away as a party favor to the daughter of the wife of his adultery.

Being one of God's spotters can be very fulfilling, but it can also be very dangerous. People don't always appreciate the service that spiritual spotters provide for them.

We had some spiritual spotter with us this week. Members of the O AFC team have assisted Messiah and Shepherd in leading an effort to knock on doors in our community. Not everybody who received a call appreciated the visit. It is because these young people care so much for the spiritual well-being of our neighbors that they were here to assist us.

That is truly what the Ongoing Ambassadors For Christ is all about. It is their joy to knock on doors and tell people the good news about Jesus. That doesn't come without some resistance. When we approached folks on Wednesday, there were those who simply said they weren't interested and closed their door to us. On the surface, people appear to be very secure in their current situation, living with or without Christ. Talk of sin and death makes people uncomfortable. You can be sure that John didn't rejoice in having to tell Herod that he was sinning. And yet, he was being faithful to God's Word in preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. I am so grateful for the selfless and loving service that this team of O AFC members has offered to our community. They have knocked on the doors and had conversations with our neighbors. I was amazed at the number of people who live less than two blocks from Shepherd of the Valley have no idea who we are. That is an indictment against us. How do others view our congregation? What message do we portray to our community? I have been inspired and renewed in my desire to truly reach out into the community into which we have been called to care for our neighbors where they are. They may not come to us. That means we may have to become a little bit uncomfortable and go to them. After all, it is a matter of their eternal well-being that we are talking about.

The Lord did some amazing work in recent days. On Thursday I received this e-mail.

Dear Pastor Wolfgram

My family and I am not currently member of your church but i received something yesterday. I have two Children that I would like to get baptized but would like it to be a private ceremony is this possible to do at Shepherd of the Valley? If so can you please let me know either via email or phone? Thank you for your time.

Thank you

When I called this person, she indicated that she had received the information that was left on her door. In this case it didn't even take a conversation, simply information. If we are to serve our neighbors, they need to know that we are here. We are here to proclaim Christ.

Pastors do their share of spotting as well. Being a pastor can be just as dangerous as being an apostle or a prophet. Down through the centuries millions of pastors have lost their lives because they faithfully proclaimed repentance and forgiveness. It can be just as dangerous to be a spiritual spotter in modern times as it was for John the Baptizer in his day.

Fortunately, this country has laws against killing or injuring pastors. People in this country have other ways of persecuting pastors. Many families have roast pastor for Sunday dinner after a faithful man has only done what God has called him to do.

Jesus had a vision for pastors. They were to warn people of spiritual danger and then tell them about the only place of spiritual safety. Jesus said, *[Luke 24:47] "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations ..."* In order to proclaim repentance, a pastor must tell people about God's law and then tell them how they break it. A pastor must show people that they are wrong and that the penalty for being wrong is eternity in hell. Pastors do this in love because they want to make people aware of their spiritual danger and move them to a place of spiritual safety.

How do you respond when your spiritual spotter points out dangers in your life? Do we seek to "kill the messenger" when God's spokesman

reminds us of that one moment of weakness, that one word we cannot take back, that one night we lost our purity, that one day we lost our temper?

5

After people become aware of their spiritual danger, the pastor then has the wonderful opportunity to proclaim forgiveness. There is a place that is safe from spiritual danger. That place is at the cross of Jesus Christ.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptizer died. Although he was a great prophet, he was still a sinner. His death saved no one, but his death did witness to another. His message in life and his witness in death pointed to the one who would follow him, Jesus Christ.

Some time after John died; other rulers conspired to commit another crime of violence against Jesus. They tortured Him and then nailed Him to a cross. His death on the cross did something John's death could never do. Jesus had lived a perfect life. He had not committed one sin. His death on the cross was totally and completely undeserved. Because Jesus died in total innocence, His death takes away the sins of the whole world. That means He died for your sins and He died for my sins. Those who place their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins are safe from the eternal damnation that our sins deserve.

The pastor also has the opportunity to proclaim the good news of the resurrection – the news that although Jesus died for our sins, He did not stay dead. Jesus is true God and death cannot hold Him. He rose from the dead and lives and reigns forever more. Christ's resurrection opens up the door to eternal life in heaven for all who believe in Him. What a tremendous joy it is for pastors to proclaim the victory of Christ that gives us the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation.

Spiritual spotters have lives that are full of great contrasts. They want all people to be in that safe place at the cross of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, many people refuse to listen to the warning and remain in their trespasses and sins. This can cause many a pastor to wet his pillow with tears at the end of the day. In other cases, the Holy Spirit works faith in people and puts them in the safety that comes with faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. It is then that the pastor rejoices with the angels in heaven over the sinner who has received salvation.

Spiritual equivalents of heavy I-beams are falling all over the place. This world is full of sin. When one of God's spotters gives you a warning, he is only doing what God has called him to do. He is warning of the danger of sin and proclaiming the safety of faith in Jesus who died on the cross for you and then rose from the dead. The warning of a faithful spotter is an act of

love and not an act of judgment. He only wants you to abide forever in the safety of Jesus Christ. Amen