

"I AM NO PROPHET"

Amos 7:1-17

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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"Speaking truth to power." That's what prophets do. They stand before the people and they speak the word God has told them to speak. The problem is that it is usually not a word that the people want to hear- especially people in power. We don't often hear from prophets when people are in right relationship with God and with each other. Their words aren't necessary when the people of God are being faithful and worshiping God in appropriate ways. Biblical prophets are **not** called to speak out when the rich are taking care of the poor. We don't hear from them when the kings and judges and priests are doing their jobs justly and fairly. We don't hear from the prophets when war has ceased and corruption and greed have vanished.

Unfortunately, in biblical times- and even today- hardly a day goes by when the word of the prophet is not necessary. Prophets are called to serve when there is a need. From the biblical record and from our own news headlines we can see that the prophets were, and are, needed most of the time.

Prophets are generally not popular with the powers that be—probably because the leaders are usually the ones who are abusing power and oppressing God's people. Throughout history prophets have been persecuted, reviled, arrested, deported, exiled, and even killed. This could be the reason why most of the biblical prophets didn't jump at the chance to answer God's call to speak. I can't think of one prophet who, when called by God, immediately shot their hand in the air and cried out, "Ooooh, ooooh me! Pick me!"

The most famous prophets in the Bible were a bit more reluctant. They knew what was at stake. They had doubts about their own abilities to be God's messenger. See if you can match the prophet with the excuse:

"The pyrotechnics are impressive, God, but I don't talk so good." (Moses)

"I am just a kid and have no idea what to say." (Jeremiah)

"This vision of heaven is great, God, but I am a sinful man and I come from a long line of sinful people." (Isaiah)

"I know I am married to the king, but that doesn't mean I can just walk right in and plead my case, even to save my people. I could be killed." (Esther)

Speaking truth to power can be a dangerous vocation when the truth is God's truth and the power is human power. People in charge like things the way they are. As long as they have what they want, they don't want anything to change. The mighty enjoy the view from their thrones. They enjoy the perks of the job- money, status, power. They don't want anyone getting in their way- especially a messenger from God.

To ensure that the people know God is on their side, those in power keep the religious leaders firmly in their pockets. And the religious leaders preach their sermons fully aware of whose signature is on their paychecks. Things haven't changed that much since biblical times, have they?

Prophets are so unpopular because they turn everything upside down and inside out. They are beholden to no one but God. They receive their call from God and they speak the divine word without embellishment, apology, or editing. They speak the harsh words no one wants to hear and they deliver God's message with concern and sorrow for the people but also with holy rage and righteous anger. If the kings and the priests don't want to hear what they have to say, that's tough, because they will say it anyway. Prophets speak because they have been spoken to.

Amos was called by God to speak to God's people in a time of prosperity and peace when the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer; in a time when the poor were being exploited by the rich who lived in comfort and luxury.

Amos was from the southern kingdom of Judah, from a small village a few miles from Jerusalem and Bethlehem. He was not a priest or a religious leader. He was a farmer from a family of farmers. He took care of his sheep and pruned the sycamore trees. He was as surprised as anyone when the voice of God roared in his ear.

Some prophets hear their call from God in a quiet voice but not Amos. God roared like a lion with such strength and ferocity that the pastures withered and the mountain top dried up. Amos was minding his own business, caring for his sheep when God's voice blasted from the heavens. God sent Amos to the northern kingdom of Israel where King Jeroboam was forging an empire built on territorial expansion, aggressive militarism, and unprecedented economic prosperity for the one percent. Somewhere along the way, during his forty-one year reign, the king forgot that he was a servant of God. The religious leaders supported his desire for power and they

gave their blessing to everything he did- in effect, pimping their religion for the king's advancement.

And he rewarded them handsomely. They had a pretty good thing going in Israel.

And then along came Amos, a redneck farmer from the south who was not welcome in their elite and comfortable world. *"With graphic details that make you wince, Amos describes how the rich crushed the poor; the affluent with their expensive lotions, elaborate music, and vacation homes with beds of ivory; sexual debauchery and abuse; a corrupt legal system that sold justice to the highest bidder; predatory lenders who exploited vulnerable families; and religious leaders who aided and abetted all of this."* (1)

In our text for today Amos is taking aim at the high priest Amaziah, the guy in charge of the temple at Bethel where the royal family worshiped. Amos delivered a word of warning to all of the religious leaders who bowed down to the king. The collusion of religious and political institutions is blatant when Amaziah says to Amos, "Bethel is the king's sanctuary." Funny, Amos thought it was God's sanctuary.

The priest was an expert at speaking pleasing words to the king, soothing his conscience, and telling him only what he wanted to hear. So Amaziah ran to the king and said Amos was being unpatriotic and was saying bad things about him. The priest warned Amos that he should leave town and go home where he belongs. Amaziah was the king's cheerleader- he no longer worked for God but for the empire.

In all of his preaching Amos didn't really have anything new to say- he merely repeated what God had been telling the people for generations. *"We made a promise, a covenant, when I brought you out of slavery in Egypt. You promised to be my people and I promised to be your God. Only one of us has been keeping up on our end of the deal- and it isn't you."*

God is angry because the people have taken advantage of their special relationship with God. They think they can do no wrong. They think that no matter what they do or don't do they will be blessed. What they continue to forget is that it is precisely **because** of their special relationship with God that God expects more from them. God was angry because they knew better. God built the foundation of their faith and their life together. When God measured it at the beginning it was firm, solid, straight. But now, when God measures it again with a symbolic carpenter's plumb line, the walls are warped, crooked, and unstable. In God's eyes a warped foundation is worse than no foundation at all.

If they didn't know what was expected of them then they could be excused for their behavior. But they did know. God told them over and over and yet they chose to turn their backs on their God and their sisters and brothers. Instead of worshiping God they chose to worship their nation, their king, their wealth. It wasn't just a mistake that they didn't measure up. It was their choice. They willingly turned from their solid foundation in God and chose another way; a warped way that would lead to their destruction. Amos's purpose was to give them a chance to repent and change direction.

Life was so good for the people of Israel that they forgot that they still needed God. They thought life was so good because they deserved it, they believed that they earned it all by themselves. The appearance of Amos proves that God had not given up on the people. God gave them chance after chance and they refused to turn away from evil. God showed Amos two visions of destruction- a plague of locusts and a severe drought and both times Amos interceded on their behalf and twice God backed off. Finally Amos says, "Enough! You have made your choices, now live with them."

The biblical prophets tell us that God's presence in society is seen through the presence of justice and righteousness. But the people have perverted what it means to be God's people and there is no justice. Amos's painful message in chapter five is powerfully captured in Eugene Peterson's translation, THE MESSAGE. Amos speaks the word of God, saying, "*I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.*"

*I want nothing to do with your religious projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fundraising schemes, your public relations and image making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time to you sang to me?*

*Do you know what I want? I want justice- oceans of it. I want fairness- rivers of it. That's what I want. That is **all** I want!" (Amos 5: 21-24)*

*"But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

*"The biblical prophets, like Amos, and all those who came before and after him, are the most powerful and effective voices ever heard on this earth for keeping religion honest, humble, and compassionate." (2)*

What God wants is what God has always wanted. For the rich to care for the poor, for the legal system to be fair, for the temple to be a place of God worship and not empire worship. God and Amos will not settle for less.

Divine anger permeates the book of Amos. God has lost patience with the people because they don't think that what they are doing is sin. Their evil ways have become so accepted in their culture and their religion that they don't see what the fuss is all about.

The name "Amos" comes from the Hebrew verb which means "to carry a load." And that is what Amos did. He carried the heavy burden of God's word to God's belligerent people. He carried the words of anger and disappointment. But he also carried the call to repentance and the promise of forgiveness. And in the end he carried a word of hope as well.

At the end of the book of Amos we read, *"I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord your God."* (Amos 9:14-15)

Amos came not to comfort the people but to disturb them. He came to upset their comfortable religion and their self-centered society. He came to remind them of who they are and whose they are.

Sister Joan Chittister calls us to be more than spectators in our world today. She calls us to be the prophetic voices that are desperately needed in our nation. In her book, *THE TIME IS NOW: A CALL TO UNCOMMON COURAGE*, she reminds us that we have a *"spiritual obligation to reshape a world run amok."* (3)

She writes, *"Prophetic spirituality calls us to walk in the wake of the biblical prophets of ancient Israel, to hear the word of God for the world, and repeat it, shout it, model it until the world comes awake. It is to demand it until the hungry are fed and the sick are cared for and the violent are sent away empty of their power to destroy."* (4)

Sister Joan says, *"The great prophets both comfort the wounded and work at changing the structures that embed the wounding to the point that we all come to take it for granted."* (5)

Brothers and Sisters, that is our job, as long as children are kept in cages, that is what we are called by Christ to do- "to comfort the wounded and to change the structures that inflict the wounds."

God has hope even for a people with a warped foundation. That is good news for us too.

May it be so.

Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *Journey with [jesus.net](http://jesus.net), Reflections by Dan Clendenin, posted July 9, 2007.*
- *THE MESSAGE, Eugene Peterson, Nav Press. 2002. Pg. 1641.*
- *THE TIME IS NOW: A CALL TO UNCOMMON COURAGE, Joan Chittister, Convergent. 2019. 26.*
- *Chittister, pg. 28.*
- *Chittister, pg. 36.*