



WHAT WOULD AMOS SAY?

August 7, 2016, The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8:1-12

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God of ancient truths, your Word comes to us from voices long ago, yet your Spirit continues to move. You always hear our voices; we ask now that you open our ears to hear yours. Speak to us, O Lord, and quiet the noise that surrounds us. Breathe new life into these ancient words so we may see you at work and join in your ministry. Call to us again, Holy God, and strengthen us for the journey. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

You may have noticed that today the text Annie read is not one of the lectionary texts on the front of your bulletin. Week to week, when a preacher chooses or feels pulled to one Biblical text over another, preachers often choose narrative and story over poetry and prophet. The lectionary presents us each week with 4 texts—a Psalm, an Old Testament lesson, an Epistle lesson, and a Gospel story. For almost half of the year in this current cycle, the voice of the prophets has been the Old Testament lesson. Time for an honest confession: when the prophets come into the rotation—we preachers often avoid them. We want a story, a narrative in which we can find a connection. Early on Sunday morning, who wants to hear a voice of judgment from the prophets? From the pulpit, even in our own Bible studies, we want narrative; we want tales of love and acceptance, of welcome and friendship. And these stories are certainly all throughout the pages of Scripture. But lest we forget them, there are also other Scripture passages that go beyond narrative. They recall narrative and are always based on narrative, but they are much more. They are the prophets. They remind us of the story of God's love, but their task is to go beyond the story to remind us how to live in response to this love.

With all the talking in our society and constant chatter on the news about what he tweeted, what she said, what this analyst thinks, what that commentator shared—I think we need a new voice, a Biblical voice. I don't know about you, but I'm angry



about political and social discourse in this country, by the voices that fill my news media and occupy the microphones. To quote another preacher, in the midst of this noise, “We need to heed the voice of the Scriptures.”¹ Friends, I think we need to go back to the prophets. Lest we think the Bible has nothing to say about the events of our day, let’s return to the people who do . . . the prophets. It was their job to speak truth to culture, to bring God’s Word into the realities of the day. They show up in the lectionary more often than not so maybe *they* are the voices we should be listening to.

The prophets were an unpopular lot; they were called to say the things people didn’t want to hear. To quote my husband, “we love the hope-filled poetry of Isaiah and we might even know some of the crazy visions from Ezekiel. But the minor prophets don’t pull any punches.” Over the next several weeks, I’m going to re-introduce you to some of them: Amos today, then Hosea next week, then Micah, and finishing with Joel. All of these prophets have been and will be in the lectionary this summer and fall. Considering we’re in the midst of and headed into a heavy political season, when everyone seems to be talking over each other, I think it’s time, as people of faith, we heed the voice of the prophets.

But let me be clear, I’m not focusing on the prophets this August to put forward any agenda. I’m doing it first because the prophets are Scripture. But second, because I think the voices of the prophets are getting lost. As people of faith, we desperately need to remind ourselves of the voices of Scripture, voices that have shaped our faith and its teachings. The prophets, whether minor or major, fill the pages of the Old Testament. They are the ones who come to the people of God to get them back on track, to remind them of who God called them to be and how God called them to live. In our world of media, we are surrounded by voices: 24-hour cable news, radio, podcasts, internet, social media; more news outlets than we can keep up with. And because of the myriad of voices we’re surrounded with,

¹ From Rev. Dr. William Barber II’s speech at the 2016 Democratic Convention. He is the North Carolina NAACP President and founder of North Carolina’s people protest “Moral Monday”. Transcript: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2016/7/28/1553896/-Moral-Monday-s-Rev-William-Barber-IGNITES-the-DNC-Lead-With-Love>



I'm afraid we might be following prophets of our own making rather than those in Scripture. Therefore, today and for the next several weeks, I want to invite you to go back to the prophets of old and see what they might teach us in 2016. Today, let's start with Amos.

Let me tell you a little about Amos. Amos is a farm boy—a herdsman and “a dresser of sycamore trees.”² At this time, the kingdom of Israel was split and Amos is from the southern kingdom. But when God calls Amos, God calls him to prophesy to the people of the northern kingdom. It would be like asking a rural boy of Mississippi to go and preach in the middle of Wall Street here in New York City. Not an easy task. But you know what? Amos sticks it to the folks in the north. They're enjoying prosperity, both militarily and economically, but it's at the expense of many. The poor, the widows and the orphans are struggling, and Amos reminds God's people that this is unacceptable.

Our women's Bible study ran into Amos last fall when we studied the Biblical image of water. You might be familiar with the verse from Amos, chapter 5 “Let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,”³ a verse repeated like poetry in Martin Luther King Jr's *I Have a Dream* speech. And while it's a beautiful image of God's gift of justice, if you were to read the verses before this line, God tells the people “I hate your festivals, I despise your worship, take me away from your noise.” So the water that Amos speaks of flowing down is an image of a flood of justice that will cover the land and destroy everything in its wake. Amos's message is a difficult pill to swallow, especially if you're somebody in a place of privilege.

With all of the prophets I'll preach on this month, you could easily read their books in one sitting; they're all brief. But in their brevity, they pack quite a punch. Amos, more than anything, reminds God's people that God is always on the side of the oppressed, and in this case God will punish those who exploit and abuse the

² Amos 7:14.

³ Amos 5:24.



vulnerable. At the beginning of the book, Amos begins preaching and wins his crowds over by denouncing their enemies for their evil behavior. But soon, Amos goes from criticizing their enemies to criticizing his audience. His prophecies pronounce judgment on the people of the northern kingdom, and by chapter 7, right before today's text, the priest shouts Amos down and orders him to flee and return home.⁴ Like I said, the prophets were often an unpopular group of God's leaders.

So in today's text, the text that Annie just read, this vision of a summer fruit basket is not a basket of ripe, warm summer vegetables brought home from the local market. Consistent with his other images, Amos reveals to God's people that the time is ripe for punishment. Their prosperity has been at the expense of others and now their harvest will be destroyed. They have abused the poor and needy, so they will have no fruit. God is a God of justice, Amos says, and soon there will come a time when not a shred of life, or ripe fruit, will be found. In other words, "God isn't sending us a fruit basket. God is asking us to see the pain of the world. God is asking us to respond by rooting out the injustice that causes it."⁵

Are you done with Amos by now? Stay with me, because he's more than an ancient voice. Friends, ask yourselves, what would Amos say to us now, thousands of years later?

For starters, once he got talking, we'd probably try and kick Amos out too, just like that priest did. Because ultimately, Amos makes us uncomfortable. He reminds us of God's justice and reteaches us truths we should already know. . . like the fact that God is always on the side of the oppressed. In Scripture, God always shows favor on those most at risk, on those who are the most vulnerable. If the widow, the orphan and the stranger were the most at risk in the Old Testament, whom would we now put into that group? Think about it, because those are the individuals upon whom God shows favor and who the prophets remind us are being neglected.

⁴ Amos 7:10-13.

⁵ Melissa Browning, Jul 17, 2016, *On Scripture* blog: <http://www.onscripture.com/death-injustice-and-basket-fruit>



Friends, if Amos were to appear on the scene now he would remind us of two things. First, our God, who loves us more than we can imagine, is a God of justice. God does not look favorably upon those who hurt God's children, particularly those most at need. We often only focus on God's mercy when we tell stories from the Bible. But Scripture reminds us, the prophets most definitely, that God's love is defined by mercy AND justice. There is no love without making things right for the oppressed. God loves us and this world so deeply and so intimately that this same love demands justice.

Second, Amos would tell us that we shouldn't be surprised by these truths. From the time of the Exodus from Egypt, God hears the cries of those in need and delivers justice. The problem is that we often define justice in human terms. We forget that justice in the Bible is defined by the grace and redemption of the cross. Think back to Mary's words in Luke when she hears she will be the mother of Jesus: *"The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."*⁶ Friends, God's justice is not defined on our terms. Justice comes through truth telling, through reversing who's in power, and through service to those most in need. Justice is demanded in the Old Testament, and revealed through the cross of Jesus in the New Testament.

So if we were to hear from brother Amos now, he'd probably remind us that the majority of us stand in places of privilege. And being in a place of privilege means we have a responsibility to care for those most in need. Because our God is a God of justice—God will make things right, Amos won't let us forget it. So then our calling is to join in this work of justice because things with God's children are not well. The orphan, the widow and the stranger still exist, but there are many other categories of people who are oppressed and in need. We, like our Lord, need to be listening for their voices, speaking for them at times, and caring for them as God does. That is what God is already doing and the ministry we need to participate in now.

⁶ Luke 1:52-53.



So here's where I end this sermon and what I want to remind you of in worship this month—the prophets are not alone. God has given each of us a prophet's voice. Not an angry voice, not a voice of condemnation, but a prophet's voice. We forget that we have this calling because our society teaches us to argue rather than listen and speak truth. A prophet speaks not for himself or herself, but for God, relying on the truth that has been given to us. A prophet's voice is a voice that is willing to talk about the things of God, not the things of power, of popularity, or prestige. This is a voice willing to speak justice to systems, to people, to situations that demand change. And it won't make you popular, just ask Amos. But it will make you faithful.

Friends, it's time we heeded the voice of the prophets and joined in God's work of justice for all peoples. If God can call a country boy like Amos who's busy tending sheep, God can use each one of us to bring about the will of the Lord.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.