

“Embracing Our Inner Prophet”
Amos 1:1-2, 5:14-15, 21-24
October 29, 2017

For the rest of this month we are going to be taking a look at the writings of some of the Hebrew prophets, writings that focus on justice and hope. In light of what’s going on in our world, I think the words of these ancient prophets are especially timely. We need to hear a word of justice and we need to hear a word of hope. And we need a prophet to rise up like Amos did to speak on God’s behalf.

Because that’s the role of a prophet, you see. Many people think a prophet is someone who tells the future, a fortune-teller of sorts. But that’s a misunderstanding. Prophets speak the word of God into the current context of the day. They look at where things are heading if trends continue unchanged. They critique any system which oppresses those who are marginalized, and are completely intolerant of any sort of complacency about current conditions. And that almost always results in pushback from those in power. Rather than seen as speakers of truth, prophets are usually seen as trouble-makers, as extremists, and as enemies of the state. Prophets are the voices that call for reform.

Amos was a prophet. And one of the things that makes the person of Amos unique is he was a simple breeder of sheep and a dresser of sycamore trees. He was a common, ordinary blue-collar worker with callouses on his hands. That’s unusual for Hebrew prophets. For instance, Isaiah was a member of the royalty. And Jeremiah was the son of a Jewish priest. But Amos, on the other hand, had no seminary degree. He was just a blue-collar layperson who knew right from wrong and felt called by God to cross over from the Southern Kingdom of Judah to speak God’s truth to the powers in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The Northern Kingdom was pretty much at the height of its power. Things were going well there. The housing market was booming, champagne flowed, and everyone wore name-brand designer clothes. Well, almost everyone. Sure, there was plenty of wealth. But as always seems to be the case, the rich manage to get richer as the poor get poorer. In chapter 4, the rich were described as oppressing the poor and crushing the needy. (4:1)

And so Amos, left his rural village of Tekoa, and crossed over into the Northern Kingdom to remind them that Yahweh was the one true God and things weren’t looking good for them with all their cosmopolitanism and opulent luxury, not to mention their restoration of Baal worship.

Had Amos lived today, he would be like someone crossing the border from Northern Mexico into the U.S. hell bent on critiquing us and our lifestyle: our supposed healthcare reform that offers tax breaks for the rich and makes it impossible for the working class to afford health insurance; our wastefulness and disregard for the environment because it is simply too inconvenient to recycle; and our refusal to attend to the poor, the homeless, and the hungry if it means sacrificing today’s Venti, double shot, Peppermint White Chocolate Mocha with light whip and extra syrup.

Such an intruder would be considered a nuisance, a troublemaker by many people. And that was the case for Amos, too. Annoyed by Amos’s denunciations against Israel, a priest reported him for conspiring against Israel’s king. And although Amos tried to defend himself, many in Israel saw him as a nuisance, and he felt compelled to hurry back to the safety of his hometown in Judah. But not before this morning’s words of judgment against the mockery Israel had made of religion.

Speaking on behalf of God, Amos says, “I despise and reject your feasts! I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies! When you offer me burnt offerings, I reject your oblations, and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle! Spare me the racket of your chanting! Relieve me of the strumming of your harps! Instead, let justice flow like a river, and righteousness flow like an unending stream.”

And so, it’s apparent that two things emerge from Amos’s words: that which God despises and that which God desires.

He denounces the current state of religion in Israel. It’s a religion that’s superficial. Apparently, everyone is going through the motions. They do the equivalent of attending church, placing money in

the offering basket, and singing their songs. But it's hollow and empty. So much so, that somehow they are able to put on their act of piety while at the same time trampling the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and pushing the afflicted out of the way, in the words of the prophet. (2:7)

But can Christians today say we are any better than Amos's audience when a megachurch in Houston run by a pastor who receives an eight-figure annual income recently refused to open its doors to families whose homes had been flooded out? Yes, Joel Osteen did eventually open the doors of his stadium-church to folks, but only after his exposure by the media.

But today's supposedly religious folk have taken things a step further than their ancient counterparts. Not only do they trample the poor and push away the afflicted *while* still claiming their version of Christianity. Today they have managed to oppress *in the name* of Christ!

Today we see religiously affiliated schools firing women because they became pregnant while not married; business owners refusing to provide insurance coverage for contraception for their employees; graduate students, training to be social workers and refusing to counsel queer people; pharmacies turning away women seeking to fill birth control prescriptions; and bridal salons, photo studios, and reception halls closing their doors to same-sex couples planning their weddings. And it's all done, not in spite of religion, but in the name of it.

According to Amos, this sort of religion is despised by God. A religion that empowers a person to oppress others is a detestable religion to God.

But one that promotes justice and righteousness is a religion after God's own heart. Unless our religion transforms us into people of action, people who stand up for the rights of others, God has no use for it. Religion needs to be about justice flowing like a river, and righteousness flowing like an unending stream, according to Amos.

In other words, instead of an hour of empty rituals, religion needs to be about relationship. We need to be in relationship with each other, lifting each other up. And we need to be in relationship with our local and global neighbors.

That's what God desires! God desires a people who are truly concerned about the needs of those around us, not people who are intent on protecting their own best interests. God desires justice and righteousness. God desires a religion that compels its adherents to stand up for the oppressed. To stand up for Native Americans, who have endured genocide, ethnic cleansing, mass executions, death marches, broken treaties, and land theft. To stand against a U.S. criminal justice system that unfairly targets and punishes African Americans in a much more aggressive way than white people. To speak up for women who face more obstacles than men in labor markets and who receive lower wages for the same work.

Amos was a prophet who condemned these sorts of inequities. But beyond that, there wasn't anything special about him. As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, he was a blue-collar worker. He didn't have a seminary degree. He was just an ordinary person who spoke out on God's behalf and spoke up for the oppressed, regardless of the consequences. That's what a prophet does.

So how is God calling you to tap into your inner prophet's voice on behalf of others? And if that question is too intimidating, try this one on: How is God calling you to be a part of a church – this church – to tap into its prophetic voice on behalf of others? It's a question worth considering. It means doing more than going through the motions of Sunday morning worship. It means looking around and doing our part to make things right where they have gotten messy.

God doesn't need another church filled with people who grudgingly make it to the Sunday morning worship hour only to rush off as soon as the benediction is given. God needs people who have a passion for justice and righteousness. God needs prophets willing to take their place next to others who are standing in the margins. God needs us. May we be those prophets. May we each embrace our inner prophet! Amen.