

AMOS, the Prophet



The Scroll of the Prophet Amos 7:12 "And Amaziah (the priest of Bethel) said to Amos (the prophet), 'O seer, go, flee away to (south) the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for (this) is the king's sanctuary, and (this) is (the) temple of the kingdom.'"

This is the first of a four part sermon series which I am preaching this Advent, entitled: "The Prophets of Old." Readings from the prophets are the traditional first lessons for the season of Advent. Nonetheless, Episcopalians as a rule, do not really know much about the prophets, do not really understand them, and too often think of them as fortune tellers. I hope, therefore, over the next four weeks to make some sense out of the stories of four of the major biblical prophets.

Understand that the life of a prophet is a dangerous one. Speaking truth to power can be disruptive and can get you in trouble. The great Prophet Elijah, as you may remember, had to flee for his life from King Ahab and his wicked wife Queen Jezebel, where while hiding in a cave out in the wilderness, Elijah experienced the presence of God in that still small voice, that sound of sheer silence. In the passage from Amos with which I began this sermon, the Prophet Amos is fleeing for his life, fleeing south to the safety of Judah, to get away from King Jeroboam of Israel, who wants to imprison him because he did not like what Amos was saying. It was upsetting the people.

The prophets of old understood themselves to be messengers from God, and their messages from God were not always welcomed. Those prophets of old were the ones who boldly proclaimed what others would not see, or could not admit to. "Don't you know what is going on here?" the prophets seem to say. "Don't you see what is happening, and what will happen if we continue on in this way?" They were not divine soothsayers or fortune-tellers, as we so often mistakenly think, though they did at times make predictions about the future, and were at times mistaken in those predictions. They were instead individuals who courageously spoke out on God's behalf, stressing that their words were not their own, but God's, using phrases like: "Thus says the Lord" or "Hear the word of God." They were truth

tellers at a time of national crisis, and that is always dangerous thing to do, even today.

Thus in order to understand the prophets of old, you also need to understand the historical and political circumstances in which they lived. Now under good King David and then his son, wise King Solomon, Israel was at the pinnacle of their history as a nation. They were a vast, united, peaceful and prosperous country, occupying a larger territory than the modern state of Israel, from the Tigris River in the north to the Red Sea in the south. However, when King Solomon died (b.c.e. 922), his sons fought over the succession of his throne and ended up dividing their once great country into two: the Northern Kingdom called Israel and the Southern Kingdom called Judah.

There were two great Old Testament prophets in the Northern Kingdom: Amos, a simple herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, who was actually from the south, but came north to proclaim God's message; and Hosea, whom we will look at next week. Both of them became infamous in the Northern Kingdom as prophets of doom, as they foresaw the great Assyrian Empire rising in the east. They saw the threat that was coming, and the current disarray of the present government, and the current immorality of the people. It was a time of virtual anarchy in the northern kingdom. Four Israelite Kings were assassinated in the span of only fourteen years. The country was in political turmoil. Amos and Hosea saw the irresponsibility of the rulers of Israel, the corruption of the priests and temple prophets,

and the dangerous influence of foreign religious cults. Israel appeared to be forsaking its special relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had promised them the very lands upon which they dwelt. So at first, the Kings of the Israel negotiated with the Assyrians, such that northern kingdom became a vassal state of Assyria, paying an enormous annual tribute to their foreign overlords, which placed a great burden upon the people, so that the rich became richer and the poor, poorer.

So Amos began to speak out against the increased disparity between the very wealthy and the very poor, sound familiar? With vivid images, Amos declared God's judgment on the people of the north, images like a wall built with a plumb line, or a herd of locusts eating away the harvest, or a basket of rotting summer fruit. And Amos was the first of the prophets to write down his message on a scroll, perhaps because having fled south in today's reading, he began then to write down his words so as to pass them on to the people of the north. For as a prophet, he felt burdened with the need to proclaim the words that the Lord had laid upon his heart. And Amos' major themes were matters of social justice, and warnings of doom, but at last with a little hope for the eventual restoration of David's Kingdom, which sadly never came for the northern Kingdom.

For Amos, religion consists not in ritual, but in righteousness. "I hate, I despise your festivals," says the Lord, according to Amos, "and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you

offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," wrote Amos, a phrase Martin Luther King Jr.'s used in his famous speech "I Have a Dream." The rich in the north were condemned by Amos for their lack of care for the needy. He described them as lying upon their ivory beds, while selling the poor for the price of a pair of sandals. The relationship between the people of Israel is articulated by Amos to be a moral contract. If the people of Israel fall below the moral requirements of God, then their relationship with God will certainly be dissolved. So Amos prophesized that the dreaded Day of the Lord was coming, a day of final reckoning for their sins.

And indeed historical events in Israel moved rapidly toward disaster. When the Assyrian leader died in 727 b.c.e., the King of Israel aligned himself instead with the Kingdom of Egypt to resist any further Assyrian domination. But the move backfired and the Assyrians responded with overwhelming force. In the first months of 721 b.c.e., after a three month siege, the city of Samaria, the capital city of the north, fell to the foreigners. The Assyrian King then deported the aristocracy and upper classes into the far away region of Persia, more than 27,000 Israelites were dispersed forever into distant lands, as Amos had foreshadowed. The Assyrian King then

forcefully repopulated Israel with colonists from Babylonia, Elam, and Syria, colonists who intermarried with the few remaining Israelite peasants and whose children then became the hated "Samaritans" of the New Testament, those worthless half-breeds of the north, not like the full-blooded 'Jews' of Judah in the south. And thus the words of Amos' famous dirge finally become a historical reality: "Fallen is the virgin Israel. No more to rise." The Northern Kingdom was gone. They had not heeded the warnings of the prophets, and so those ten tribes of Israel were lost forever.

How fitting then is Jesus' famous story about a poor man who falls among thieves and is rescued by a Good Samaritan. Those Samaritans in Jesus' day were still hated, for being only half descendants of King David, for worshipping on the wrong mountain, in Samaria in the north and not in Jerusalem in the south, and for simply being unrighteous and unclean peasants, for not strictly keeping the law and commandments of Moses. Yet in Jesus' story, it was not the pious priest or the law abiding Levite who was held up as the example, though they surely kept Moses' commandments. No, it was the despised Samaritan who was the good neighbor, who upon seeing the man laying half dead in the ditch, was moved to pity; who went to him and bandaged his wounds, poured oil upon them, and made provisions for his care. That man was deemed righteous in the eyes of God, says Jesus, that man loved his neighbor as himself. Not the priest or the Levite who lived by the Law, but the hated Samaritan, the poor half-

breed from the tribe left behind, the one who showed mercy. For it is mercy and compassion that are the true signs of God's favor, said Amos, not prosperity or hard work or religious piety, but mercy and compassion. And so Jesus said to the lawyer who was inquiring what he must do to inherit eternal life, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (The lawyer) said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." Amen.