

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 12, 2015
Pentecost 7
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Amos 7:7-17
Psalm 85:7-13
Ephesians 1:1-14
Mark 6:7-13

I have heard and preached a lot of sermons in my life. Most of you could say the same, especially in the “listening to sermons” category. I did some calculating this week, and estimate that in my life I have probably preached upwards of 1,500 sermons. And of those 1,500 sermons, guess how many were preached from the book of Amos?

Three.

There may be many reasons for that. But one reason is that Amos is *tough*. Amos is *blunt*. Amos has no use for political correctness. Amos said things 2,800 years ago that no one much wishes to hear *today*. Amos is, in preaching parlance, a *chief ruffler of feathers*.

Amos grew up and worked among the shepherders of Tekoa, a small town in the *Southern Kingdom* of Judah about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. (Note: Under King David, Israel was a “united” Monarchy. But that did not last long. Divisions arose among various tribes that led to the split of the kingdom into the Kingdoms of Judah (the South) and Israel (the North). Amos was of humble stock. He earned part of his living tending Sycamore trees. Certain kinds

of Sycamore trees in Palestine produce figs. Fig growers helped the figs ripen by piercing them a short time before the harvest.

Even though Amos grew up in the *Southern* Kingdom of Judah, he was called by God to minister in the *Northern* Kingdom of Israel. Because of this, many looked at him with suspicion, and even disdain. (Imagine someone coming up from California to Idaho and sharply criticizing us for our lifestyle, our politics, and our church practices.)

Amos ministered during the time of the reign of King Jeroboam II in Israel, sometime between 793-753 BC. It was a time when economic prosperity and political stability had led to great spiritual decay among the people. This spiritual decay manifested itself primarily in social injustice. The rich exploited the poor. The powerful dominated the weak. Morality meant little or nothing.

The people of the Northern Kingdom initially were suspicious of Amos, but as he began his ministry they “warmed up” to him quickly. The reason for this was that Amos pronounced God’s judgment on all of their enemies! Whether it was Damascus or Philistia, or Edom or Ammon or Moab, Amos denounced them all and pronounced them ripe for God’s judgment. So, even though this guy had come up from the South, this was the kind of preaching these Northerners could heartily support!

And then, the fly lands in the soup. Amos turns his attention to the people of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. In today's text, he uses a telling metaphor for God's deep displeasure with the people. In a vision, God shows Amos a plumb line. It's the only time this term is used in the Old Testament. Verse 8 is a compelling sentence, and the *New Living Translation* does not capture its full import. The Hebrew reads: "Look! I am setting a plumb line in the very midst of my people; **I will never again pass by them!**"

Remember, Israel has long been defined as the people whom Yahweh "passed over" in their escape from Egypt. But no more. No more Passover, says Amos.

Why? Because the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom have abandoned the life of communal equality and justice that God called them to when He delivered them from Egypt. Amos tells them that things are so bad that if their enemies the Philistines and Egyptians came to Samaria (the Northern capital) and saw its wickedness, even *they would be appalled* (3:9-15).

Amos then criticizes the wealthy women of Samaria, whose lives of opulent indulgence came through their exploitation of the poor in their midst. Amos compares these women to the well fed cows of Bashan, a region known for its rich soil and well fed cattle. But the day is coming, says Amos, when the enemy will herd these well fed cattle up and haul them away into captivity.

Amos then criticizes the people for their worship practices. They continued to take all of their animal sacrifices to the temple and participated in their prescribed rituals, but their lives were full of sin. So, Amos paints a picture of a Israel's funeral, and he sings a lament at the funeral service:

You trample on the poor and snatch from them their necessary grain for living, building houses of well-dressed stones. But you will not live in them! You have planted lovely vineyards, but you will never drink the wine! You have afflicted the righteous, taken bribes, and shoved aside the needy in the gate. (5:10-12)

Amos then caps his message with his famous words: *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:24).*

Now a plumb line, as we know, tests a wall's straightness. Here, in Amos' message, it symbolizes God's righteous standard. God has tested Israel, and has found her crooked. He will now need to tear her down and start over.

Someone once said that the prophets were called to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Amos does just that. He does not merely speak truth. He speaks truth *to power*. He is confronted by Amaziah, the high priest of Bethel.

Amaziah sends a message to King Jeroboam, warning him of the dangers Amos presents to the crown. He uses the tool that is often used by those in power when they are threatened – he accuses Amos of hatching a conspiracy against the state. Then he tries to discredit Amos by calling him a “fortune teller,” who is

merely interested in financial gain. He tells Amos to “go home,” that his message is not welcome in the King’s central temple, the center of power.

The telling thing about Amaziah’s comment is that the temple at Bethel has less to do with *Yahweh* and more to do with *Jeroboam*. The church has been compromised by the state, and become a rubber stamp for what the state desires.

Amos rejects Amaziah’s deceit out of hand. And he promptly pronounces personal judgment on the high priest that is painful to read.

And now I understand better why I’ve only preached from Amos three times, and why his voice is mostly silent in North American pulpits. But Amos is in the canon, and he must be heard. His message, and the themes that are important to him, must also be important to us.

We must hear again Amos’ uncompromising commitment to justice, especially for those in our society who are without advocacy, money, and political influence.

We must always be vigilant to resist the temptation to substitute our worship for our care of the poorest and neediest in our midst, recognizing instead that our care for others *is part of what constitutes our worship* of God.

And we must always be aware of the dangers of the co-mingling of church and state.

And there is a final theme from Amos that we must not forget. Amos was not a professional theologian. He was a shepherd who had a part time gig as a horticulturist. Amos is just an “ordinary” guy who does not earn his living by prophesying. Yet he is summoned by God from his ordinary job to tend to the needs of God’s people.

So whoever you are, and wherever you have come from today, do not underestimate what God is capable of doing in your life. Don’t close your mind to the fact that God may want to use you, in your ordinary circumstances, to minister to others and to bless their lives.

And as we come to the Lord’s Table, remember that bread and wine are the most basic and ordinary of things. And yet, look what God does through them.

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