

## **Lectionary 15 B 2021**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

July 11, 2021

Amos 7:7-15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

A prophet, in the Bible, is someone who is sent by God with a message. A message for the people, or a message for the king. And usually the message contains God's disappointment. Not always. But usually the message is that the king or the people are doing things that displease God, and the prophet points this out, usually accompanied by God's threat of punishment or destruction. And usually with an opportunity to repent. To return to God's ways and avoid punishment and destruction.

The important thing to remember when you read the Bible is that prophets do not normally predict the future. That's the popular notion of what prophets do. But that is only a tangent to the main work of a prophet. Which is telling God's truth, usually to people who do not want to hear God's truth. And that's important in order to understand John the Baptizer in our gospel reading today. And that's important in order to understand our first reading today, from the highly articulate Old Testament prophet Amos.

John the Baptizer is called a prophet in the New Testament, and he confronted a king, Herod Antipas, with God's judgment. In today's gospel, John pays the ultimate price for conveying God's judgment. Now this incident is famous. Famous in world history. One of the peculiarities of our religion is that outside of the New Testament, there is almost no mention of Jesus of Nazareth in history. But outside of the New Testament, John the Baptist was well known to the historians of the time. And it is verified by outside observers that John confronted Herod about his marriage. (The Herod family was a cesspool of marriages, divorces, incest, and murder.) And it is verified that he was put to death at Machaerus, a fortified palace on what is now the west bank of the Jordan. And it is verified that John's death haunted Herod. It is also verifiable from other sources that Herod Antipas was viewed as weak and indecisive. So this strange relationship between Herod Antipas and John the Baptizer is well documented. Herod kept John in his prison for two years before executing him. Prophets tell the truth. They often speak the truth to powerful people, as in our gospel this morning, and as is the case in the prophet Amos, our first reading.

Amos is an extremely eloquent prophet, and the book that contains his words is electric. It's hard for the average person of faith to know this, because the context for Amos's words and life is unfamiliar. Amos lived in a time when the kingdom that had been ruled by King David and King Solomon had split in two. The Northern Kingdom—commonly called Israel or Samaria.

And the Southern Kingdom— called Judah. These were both Jewish kingdoms. But there were two, not one. And they were believed to be different tribes. And the two kingdoms were more or less rivals.

And part of what makes Amos so audacious and so compelling is that he was very awkwardly sent as a prophet to the northern kingdom from the southern kingdom. This is as though someone from France went up to England, and proceeded to tell the English everything that was wrong and bad about them. Or as though someone from California came to Arizona, and proceeded to tell the Arizonans everything that they were doing wrong. It's really awkward. Also what makes Amos so audacious and so compelling is that he does not come from a religious background. He comes from an agrarian background of farming and ranching. "A herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees." We're not sure if he is a country bumpkin or if he is the wealthy owner of an estate. But he has the wrong background. And where his words would be unwelcome at home, in the Southern Kingdom, he has taken his words to the Northern Kingdom, where he is really unwelcome.

And his words, by the way, have to do with wealth and poverty within the Northern Kingdom. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. Justice serves the rich, and the poor get taken advantage of. The corrupt prosper, while the honest get exploited. God thinks this situation is, in a word, "ungodly." And God is unimpressed by the ways in which the wealthy observe the details of some of the Ten Commandments, while ignoring the massive inequities of everyday life.

Amos delivers his message in a place called Bethel. This was the historic religious center that goes back to Genesis and Abraham. It's where Jacob saw the ladder with the angels. And there, in today's reading, Amos disputes with the priest who runs the place. The priest, whose name is Amaziah, is a defender of the king and is a defender of the status quo. And he tells Amos to go away, to go back home to the Southern Kingdom. Go and be a prophet to your heart's content, and earn your pay there, Amaziah says to Amos with scorn. This place "is a temple of the kingdom."

*A temple of the kingdom.* In other words, this is a place that tells the king what he wants to hear. This place does not challenge the status quo, but instead upholds the status quo, and gives it comfort and aid. People like you don't belong here, Amos. Prophets like you don't belong here, Amos. And that's when Amos denies that he is a prophet. He is a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. He is not a career prophet.

Amos is a story in which the religious institutions— the priest and the temple, and the career prophets (the prophets who make their bread from prophesying)— the religious institutions are as corrupt as the social and economic and political institutions. They cannot and will not state the truth, or call "a spade a spade." So God sends in an outsider. In last Sunday's first reading, God says to the prophet Ezekiel, *Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.* [Ezekiel 2:5] So even when the religious institutions and the religious leaders fail to live up to God's standard— something

that in Amos today is like a plumb line used by masons to make sure that their construction is on the level and upright— God’s standard— even when religious institutions and religious leaders fail, God still speaks through outsiders.

It’s pretty hard to silence God when God has something he wants to say. There are two men in today’s first reading. Their names both start with “AM.” Amos. And Amaziah. Our churches ought to be more like Amos. And less like Amaziah. As our psalm refrain says today: “I will listen to what the Lord God is saying.” Instead of telling Amos to get lost, Amaziah and his king need to listen to what the Lord God is saying. Bethel— where Jacob saw the ladder to heaven— needs to return to its roots, to go back to being a true House of God. (That’s what Beth El means: “house of God.”) Corrupt religion was not just something for Martin Luther to deal with. It is as old as the Old Testament and as new as this morning’s newspaper. As for me and you, let us be guided by today’s psalm 85: I will listen to what the Lord God is saying; for you speak peace to your faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to you. Amen.