



The Most Fascinating People: Amos

TEXT
Amos 5:21–24; 8:1–12

June 14, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Well, let's see. We have visited with Eve and her capacity to redefine good and evil. I'm a lot like her. We all are. We have been inspired, maybe even humbled, by the faith of Onesimus, the letter carrier for Paul.

And today it is Amos. Amos was a prophet. Prophets were people of words. That's all they had. They faced the most powerful forces of history with nothing more than words. But they spoke words, trusting that the spirit of God could use those words to work miracles.

I'm no prophet — in part because I lack that gift and in part because I lack that faith. But it seems to me we need prophets these days. More than that, we need a people who have whatever it takes to pay attention to a prophet.

I know some people who fancy themselves as prophets. They do so because they seem confident in their ability to see what's wrong with other people. But sometimes it's hard to tell if they are being prophetic or if they are just whining.

We need some real prophets. There haven't been many of those. But what has been even

less common is the people who have whatever it takes to listen to prophets.

Amos was a prophet who lived 750 years before Jesus. It was when Jeroboam II was king in Israel.¹ He lived in a time when things were well; at least the people seemed to think so. Israel was at peace with her neighbors — mostly because nations both to the north and the south were a bit weaker than they soon would be. There was a time of prosperity — not for everyone, you understand, but it was a time of prosperity for some.

If you asked the person on the street, he would tell you: "God has blessed us. These are good times for the people of God." There was no way for them to know that, in the next generation, Israel would be overrun by the Assyrian Empire and be lost. They would become what some have called the 10 lost tribes of Israel.

I say there was no way for them to know, except Amos told them that the end was coming.

I need to be careful here. I say Amos told them. He didn't tell them about the Assyrians specifically. What he told them is that they were wrong about how good things were at home. He told them that the way they

were living showed no evidence that they were God's people anymore. It was a daunting word. What do you suppose is the evidence among us that we are God's people?

There is something I want to explain about Amos — about all the prophets, actually. We have assumed, and in many cases we have been taught, that the gift the prophets had was a gift to know the future; that prophets could sometimes see hundreds of years into the future. That's not right.

The prophets were not gifted with the ability to see the future. They were gifted with the ability to see the present. That sounds somewhat silly, being able to see the present. But seeing the present is not as easy as it sounds. To know what is really going on in the present is more difficult than we might imagine. The prophets saw the present differently than others; and because they saw the present differently, they often anticipated a different future than the rest.

Carol and I had been married a year or so. We lived in this chopped up little rental house. It was an odd layout. Most of our furniture came from a collection of attics, some of it chosen, some of it cast off from friends. It was our first home, and we were grateful to have it.

I came home after an evening meeting, and Carol had been hard at work in our little den trying to make it homey. We had two windows in the den with plastic mini blinds for shades. Carol bought some fabric — not to serve as curtains. We couldn't afford that much fabric; just enough to do a swag. And she was experimenting; that's what she said. On the corner of each window she had tied the fabric in a different fashion. Each corner looked a little different from the others, and she asked me which one I liked the best.

Here's where I needed a prophet. I had no idea what was going on in the present. And because I didn't understand the present, I had wrongly anticipated my future.

Which one do I like best? I didn't realize this was a fill-in-the-blank question. I didn't realize that there was a right answer. I thought it was an essay question. "I like that one." I selected the wrong one.

Because I didn't rightly read the present, there was a different future than I anticipated. Am I making sense? I am sure this is a unique experience, and you have no idea what I am talking about, but I raise it up simply to say knowing what is really going on right now is hard to see sometimes.

So what is it that Amos saw in the days of Jeroboam II? Two things.

First, when many in Israel enjoyed a time of economic prosperity, Amos saw income inequality, as we would call it today. Those at the top are doing

very well, but across the street or the county line or the state line or however it is these divisions live on the ground, there are those who work all day and still can't afford daily bread. That reality is not relegated to biblical times. The prophets in one voice would declare that when a person works all day and still can't afford to eat, something is wrong. And it's not just wrong with that person; it's wrong with all of us.

That's the first thing. Amos declares that God is not casual about poverty.

The second thing — and this is the one that is the most difficult — is that Amos condemns their worship. "I hate, I despise your festivals, 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."

Why is God rejecting their worship? Because they ignore the needs of their neighbor all week long and then come into worship to thank God for the blessings they have received. In other words, in their worship, they pretend that God blesses the suffering of their neighbors.

Amos proclaims this is not the way of the Lord. The way of God is "to let justice roll down like waters."

Let me tell you what I think is at the bottom of all of this. This conversation about the poor is not simply a conversation about poverty. It's not simply a conversation about economics. Conversation in scripture about the poor is not a conversation about economics; it's a conversation about community.

This faith, from beginning to end, is about community. From the first chapters, when it teaches us that it is not good to be alone, to the final chapters, when it promises the day will come when we will all be at table together, this faith is about human community. And justice is the tendon that holds us together.

Let me tell you how I see this, and you may see this differently. And if you do, I hope you are right. I think this word from Amos could not be more relevant.

I have told you before that it seems to me the macro debate of the American culture is this: Are we connected to one another? Are we a community? Or are we a collection of individuals? It seems to me that we have lost the language and the practices of connection.

James Davison Hunter says, "Community is no longer 'natural' under the conditions of late modernity, and so it will require an intentionality that is unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable to most Christians and most churches."²

The loss of language of connection has taken on spiritual tones in our day.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who is one of the most honest and beautiful writers of our time, shares her spiritual perspective. She writes: "I know plenty of people who find God most reliably in books, in buildings, and even in other people. I have found God in all of these places too, but the most reliable meeting place for me has always been creation. To lie with my back flat on

the fragrant ground is to receive a transfusion of the same power that makes the green blade rise. Where other people see acreage, timber, soil, and river frontage, I see God's body. When a cricket speaks to me, I talk back. Like everything else on earth, I am an embodied soul, who leaps to life when I recognize my kin."³

I love that. I haven't spoken to crickets, but I have slept on the ground under the Quetico⁴ stars, and I know the spiritual experience of which she speaks. But there is a temptation among us to reduce the holy to an experience of nature and to fail to recognize that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who is known in community. Something is lost when my primary conversation partner regarding God is a cricket and not a Christian.

It seems to me that we have lost the language and practices of community.

It was in the early days of NEXT Church, and there was a meeting of pastors here at Village. We had been meeting all morning, and the conversation was good. We broke for lunch, and about a fourth of the group piled into my car to go to lunch. Before we left the parking lot, every one of them had their smart phones. I can still remember the day when phones didn't really have intelligence. They were all texting and talking. I was the only person in the car who wasn't having a conversation with someone who wasn't in the car. There I was, the designated driver once again.

It's funny how our technology both connects and disconnects

us. Community is not a given; it is a discipline. Relationship is not a default; it is a practice.

I believe Amos would question our culture just as he did the days of Jeroboam II. The economic inequality of our day parallels the economic inequality of Jeroboam II's day. Poverty is the symptom of a culture that fails to recognize that love of neighbor is the great commandment.

Amos saw things as they truly were. But the prophet sees more than life as it is. The prophet sees life as the power of God's love can make it. And the only vehicle he has for that is a word. He pleads, "Let justice roll down like waters."

There is more to say on this than time allows. But the incredible thing about the prophets is that more than any other people, they saw the truth of the erosion of human community. And yet they were also the most hopeful of who we could be by the power of God's love.

All they had was words. It was the prophets who spoke the most ambitious dreams for humanity.

"The lion will lie down with the lamb," Isaiah said.⁵

"Swords will be beaten into plowshares," Micah says.⁶

"My law will live in your hearts," Jeremiah says.⁷

"Let justice roll down like waters," Amos says.⁸

Justice: It is the tendon that holds us together in community.

Each week we have a worship planning meeting, and my friend Matthew Shepherd says, "Tom, it's not a good sermon

unless you tell us what to do that week." This is for Matthew: When you see the people of your life this week — co-workers, neighbors, strangers — remember that we are connected. Just remember that we belong together in this journey, and then pay attention to what happens in your own soul.

I am no prophet. Prophets are rare. We could use a prophet. But more than that, we need a people who have whatever it is that leads them to pay attention to the prophets. I do want to be part of such a people. Don't you?

¹"Israel" now refers to the northern kingdom, consisting of the ten northern tribes. Judah is the southern kingdom.

²James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (2010), p. 227

³Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*, (2006), p. 79

⁴Quetico is a national park in Canada. I join friends each summer for a few days of canoe/camping in these remote waters.

⁵Isaiah 11:6f

⁶Micah 4:3-4

⁷Jeremiah 31:31-34

⁸Amos 5:21-24

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.