

The Eyes of a Prophet

Amos 7:7-15

7th Sunday after Pentecost/ 11th July 2021

The prophet Amos was not a popular fellow. He had a difficult job. He was not his own man, shall we say. Summoned by Yahweh to preach, Amos had a calling to speak words that were not his own. The words came out from his mouth, yet they were not his. His words and yet not his words, spoken to a people, to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, who refused to hear the Word of God, people who refused to see the world from God's perspective.

Amos was a prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam II, who ruled over the Northern Kingdom from 785 to 746 B.C. It was a time of considerable peace and prosperity. People were satisfied. Maybe even Amos felt satisfied with his life—satisfied, that is, right up to the minute before God found him, this shepherd and “dresser of sycamore trees,” meaning someone who pruned or nipped trees to promote ripening for a greater yield. Amos was a reluctant prophet, reluctant to take the mantle of a prophet—which is usually a good way to tell if a prophet is authentic. A true prophet really doesn't want to be one. No one wakes up one morning and says, “I want to be a prophet one day.” It doesn't work like this. You don't really have any choice—you do, but really don't. Jeremiah spoke for many prophets when he said that even when he tried to withhold what God impressed upon his heart to say, even when he tried to silence this word within him—*I'm not going to speak any more in God's name. Nope. This is not for me. I will no longer speak for God*—he couldn't. For “then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jeremiah 20:9).

In a time of peace and prosperity, Amos was given a different word. Israel was going in the wrong direction. Here is God's charge against God's people: “they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way” (Amos 2:6-7).

Amos preached God's judgment upon the people for failing to live by God's standards of justice and righteousness. He beseeched God on behalf of the people to withhold judgment. One day, Amos was given a vision. God appeared to him standing beside a wall that had just been built using a plumb line, the plumbline was in God's hand. A plumb line, of course, is a weight suspended from a string used as a vertical reference line to ensure a structure is centered. A plumb line always finds the vertical axis pointing to the center of gravity, it ensures everything is right, justified, and centered. The plumb line is the standard by which everything else is judged. It's the guide. God places a plumb line in the midst of the people. God's vision of justice and righteousness is the standard by which everything is judged. Compared with that standard, the people, their lives, their attitudes, their customs, their choices, their economy are all judged by God.

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, the worship center of the Northern Kingdom, tells the King, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words” (Amos 7:10). Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there...” (Amos 7:12).

Yes, it's tough being a prophet. They say things that we don't want to hear, because they see things that we can't or won't see. Here in this text, just before Amos speaks, God invites him to see. Plumb line in hand, God asks, "Amos, what do you see?" Amos answers and then God says, "See, I am setting a plumb line..." (Amos 7:8).

What do you see? In many respects, a prophet is like a poet and one of the tasks of a poet is to help us to see the world with new eyes. The prophet-poet helps us see what was previously invisible to us, they bring light to dark places. Their light often exposes what's kept in the dark or shadow. Prophets often sound like they're full of doom and gloom but that's usually because what they see puts the world as it is in sharp relief. As they say, the night is always darkest before the dawn. And so you can appreciate why prophets are not that popular and why they're often killed. You can also see why a good prophet is a reluctant prophet.

But we need them. O God, do we need them. And thank God there are people God calls to this essential work. Thank God for prophet-poets. It was Walter Brueggemann, former professor at Columbia Seminary, who liked to view prophets as poets. In a wonderful interview with Krista Tippett several years ago, in her weekly program [On Being](#), Brueggemann describes the role of the prophet.¹ First, they are rooted in the covenantal traditions of Moses and Sinai. Second, "they are completely uncredentialed and without pedigree, so they just rise up in the landscape." And then "they imagined their contemporary world differently according to that old tradition. So [they were about] tradition and imagination." *Tradition and imagination*. Rooted in tradition they were able to imagine a new world aligned with God's vision for creation. Brueggemann says, they were "moved the way every good poet is moved to have to describe the world differently according to the gifts of their insight. And, of course, in their own time and every time since, the people that control the power structure do not know what to make of them, so they characteristically try to silence them. What powerful people always discover is that you cannot finally silence poets. They just keep coming at you in threatening and transformative ways."

Brueggemann reminds us that all of this is "counter-cultural," both then and now, "because our consumer culture wants somehow to narcotize us so that we just settle in on things," accepting things as they are. Citing the novelist Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Brueggemann said that a "poet or a novelist is like a pickaxe that attacks the way we've got things arranged. And I think these poems are like pickaxes that are not welcome among us, but we're going to miss out on the reality of our life if we are narcotized both about the loss and about the newness."²

In Brueggemann's classic work *The Prophetic Imagination*, he explains, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."³ And this is why prophets are often unwelcomed, rejected, or killed. It's why the church, which is often part of the dominant culture, often seduced by the dominant culture, loves to be part of the dominant culture often has difficulty with prophetic ministry, and with prophetic preaching. Whenever a sermon becomes prophetic, inevitably someone is going to get upset—and we usually hear about it.

Who are the prophets in your life, in our lives today? Who are religious and secular prophets that shake our foundations? Who are the voices that poke and prod and, yes, maybe even annoy you, that you wish would just be silent or go away? Maybe you try to avoid them, preferring the noise of the crowd so you don't have to hear them. Or when you hear them on television you reach for the remote and change the channel. Maybe you want them to go away or be silent because you know deep inside that they speak the truth, the truth in love, and sound forth the voice and will of God? Who are the prophets, the poets, the writers, the commentators, preachers, activists that help you to see, that keep you honest, that redirect your focus or attention, and thus give you fresh eyes? Who are the ones that open the world to you, that touch the wounded and tender parts of your soul and opens your heart? Who are pickaxes for the frozen sea within us? Who are the ones that invite you to hope beyond hope?

Here are some that come to mind in no particular order. Many will be familiar to you. Some might be new. William Sloane Coffin, Jr., the Berrigan Brothers, Daniel and Philip, Dorothy Day, James Baldwin, Oscar Romero, Elijah Cummings, John Lewis, Howard Thurman, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram Kendi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, William Barber, Liz Theo Harris, Isabel Wilkerson, Greta Thunberg, Dr. Fauci, Dr. Francis Collins, countless novelists, countless poets, Amanda Gordon, students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Harvey Milk in San Francisco. God speaks through these voices—and many others. This is a tiny sampling. God speaks through them and gives us a vision—they help us see the wonder, the beauty, the mystery of human life, of this world, a vision of compassion and reconciliation, wholeness and hope. These are the ones who help bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.⁴

If no one in particular comes to mind for you, then I invite you to pray and ask God for a prophet—I'm serious about this. Ask that God send you someone, living or dead, who will challenge you, and open up your world, who will cast a vision for a new world, for a new life. Pray for the voice, the writings of that prophet to somehow make their way into your life to give you fresh eyes.

And who knows, there might be an inner prophet in you. Maybe God is calling you, giving you a word, like a fire shut up in your bones, giving you a vision. Maybe you have new eyes to help us see what we cannot see, to hear what we need to hear.

What do you see?

¹ The Tippet-Bueggemann interview, including a transcript of their conversation, may be found at the On Being website:

<https://onbeing.org/programs/walter-brueggemann-the-prophetic-imagination-dec2018/>

² In 1904, the young Franz Kafka wrote a letter to a friend defining the books that are worth reading. "I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound us," he wrote. "If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? We need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is my belief."

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 13.

⁴ From the sermon, “Of Justice and the Conscience,” by Unitarian minister Theodore Parker (1810-1860), published in 1853: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”