



“Encountering Amos: The Divine Plumb Line”

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Since I’ve been in seminary, I’ve found that I have to be careful about the books I have out while I’m commuting on BART. Last fall I was preparing a sermon for a series we were doing on the Sermon on the Mount at my Field Education church, and I was on BART, reading an excellent commentary on Jesus’ sermon with the unfortunate title, *Jesus’ Plan for a New World*. This attracted the attention of my seatmate, who leaned over and said, “Excuse me, I couldn’t help but notice the title of your book. So, do you think we’re in Malachi, or Revelation?”

“Uh, what do you mean?” I replied.

“Oh, you know,” she replied, and she rattled off some disturbing prophesy from Malachi about God’s judgment on the wicked. I tried to say that my book wasn’t about the end times, it was about the Sermon on the Mount and the Kingdom of God, but she just went right on with a rant about how we were all going to hell in a hand basket, and I couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

I have to say, I was really glad when her stop came before mine. As I wished her a good day, I thought to myself, “I really need to go back and reread Malachi.” Life being what it is for a fulltime seminarian, I never did get to it.

When I saw Malachi’s fellow prophet, Amos, come up in the lectionary this summer, I thought, well now, there’s my opportunity to spend a little more time contemplating the prophetic literature.

Amos is, like Malachi, one of a grouping of relatively short, prophetic books in the Old Testament known variously as the Twelve Prophets, or the Minor Prophets. They’re not called minor because they’re unimportant, but rather because the books are shorter than the other prophets—the more familiar books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In the Protestant version of the Hebrew Bible, you’ll find the twelve all lined up together right at the end, after Daniel and before the New Testament begins with Matthew.

If you're like me and were brought up in the liberal Christian church, you probably have some familiarity with some of the Minor Prophets. I bet you know the story of Jonah and the whale—Jonah is one of the twelve. And most of us are familiar with that famous passage from Micah, chapter 6, verse 8: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" But if you're like me, I'm guessing that most of you have not read the majority of the Minor Prophets, such as Habakkuk, Haggai, Zephaniah, Nahum, and Obadiah. There's a reason for this. The message of prophets makes us very uncomfortable.

Making people uncomfortable seems to be the prophet's job, of course. They exist to speak truth to power. They exist to, as the saying goes, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. The problem with the book of Amos is that there isn't a whole lot of comfort to be found in it—just a whole lot of affliction.

Amos is considered to be the earliest of the prophetic books and the beginning of the prophetic tradition in ancient Israel. We know also that Amos came from the town of Tekoa, a village about twelve miles south of Jerusalem. He lived in the eighth century BCE, which was after the splitting of Israel into two separate kingdoms—the Northern kingdom, known as Israel, and the Southern Kingdom, called Judah. Amos lived in Judah, but claims that he was called by God to head north into Israel and prophesy to the people there. He also states that he is not a professional prophet belonging to a guild and paid by a king, but is instead an ordinary man, a breeder of cattle and sycamore trees. All this makes him an unwelcome outsider, especially considering the message he's bringing—the news that God is not pleased with the empty way that worship is performed in Israel and is especially not pleased with the way Israel treats the poor with injustice.

The ruler of Israel that Amos is confronting was the real-life king at the time, Jeroboam II, who reigned from 785-745 BCE. His long reign was relatively peaceful. There was little internal strife, and the country had through military actions strengthened the kingdom's position and expanded its territory. Historians understand that the period was a time of prosperity. But Amos points out a truth that is the case in our time as well as that of the ancients: the prosperity was a prospering of the wealthy at the expense of the impoverished. In chapter five, Amos criticizes those in Israel who "trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, [...] who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate." Despite living in a peaceful and prosperous time, Amos has nothing good to say about either Jeroboam or his priest, Amaziah. He decries the corruption of both the state and the church. He appears as nothing less than a wild-eyed extremist, out to disturb the status quo. It's no wonder that Amaziah tries to get Amos to leave town.

Like Amaziah, encountering Amos makes me uneasy, as extremists have a tendency to do. Our text today seems especially harsh in its judgment of the people, and the punishment that Amos suggests will befall Israel makes me squirm. It's easy for a contemporary reader to dismiss Amos as irrelevant for our postmodern times—and I imagine that's what some of us choose to do. But it is quite likely that our discomfort

with such a text is a sign that we need to hear the message that Amos has for us. Amos calls us to the difficult work of really looking at our society—both as individuals and as political and religious institutions—and evaluating the ways that we are not measuring up to God’s divine guideline.

We have learned in the progressive church that our God is a loving, forgiving God. We have come to believe that God loves us and forgives our faults, that God will accept us as we are and turn our crookedly built selves into something beautiful in spite of ourselves. So many of us gave up believing in the message of the harsh, judgmental God when we discovered the loving, gracious God. We learned to hope in the story of the prodigal son—that God will welcome us back when we have messed up, yet again. Yet here’s Amos, suggesting with his vision of the divine plumb line that God is not pleased with us being out of line. Amos suggests that, just like a faulty wall out of plumb needs to be torn down and remade anew, the parts of us that don’t measure up also need to die and be reborn. Yes, we are loved by God. Yes, there is nothing we need do to earn God’s grace; but once we know that love and live in that grace—once we enter into a relationship with God—we need to acknowledge those times when our workmanship is shoddy. We need to admit to those ways our lives are out of alignment with God’s will. We need to own up to the ways we collude with the powerful to take advantage of the weak. And we need to amend our lives, to tear down the crooked walls and build anew. More than that, Amos reminds us that we must also rebuild our institutions when they fail to promote justice and care for the disadvantaged.

It was not so much individual lives that Amos was concerned with, after all—it was the religious and political institutions that he criticized for their corruption and injustice, and he was critical of the ways individuals colluded with the unjust institution.

There is probably no other modern prophet and theologian who promoted the rebuilding of unjust institutions more than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There is also no other modern preacher more closely associated with the prophet Amos than Dr. King—and I think this is not coincidental. In speeches and sermons throughout his ministry, he often quoted verse 24 from chapter five of Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” He relentlessly spoke truth to power and afflicted the comfortable.

Like Amos, Dr. King was often accused of being an outsider stirring up trouble, as he worked to coordinate programs of nonviolent protest against injustice and racism in cities throughout the South. During the Birmingham demonstrations of 1963, a group of white clergymen—sounding suspiciously like Amaziah—wrote a letter to the editor expressing their concern that Dr. King’s demonstrations were stirring up trouble for the citizens of Birmingham. They believed that “honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts,” and asked that the community’s African Americans not participate in the demonstrations. King, who had been arrested during the demonstrations, wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” in response. In his letter, Dr. King aligns himself with Amos. “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here,” King writes. “Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried

their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town."

In the same way that Amos was cast as an extremist by Amaziah, Dr. King was often accused of being an extremist by moderate whites who were uncomfortable with his message. Yet King learned to embrace the label and see himself as following in the footsteps of the prophets. "Was not Jesus an extremist for love?" He reminds us. "Was not Amos an extremist for justice? [...] So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? [...] Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

Through the blurred lens of nearly 50 years, we look back at the actions of Dr. King and hold him up as one of our national heroes, a man in alignment with the will of God, a prophet worthy of association with Amos. But we forget that his unrelenting passion for racial justice, and later his passionate opposition to the Vietnam War, made many moderate people uncomfortable and earned him the title of extremist in his own time.

Who are the creative extremists of our time? Who are those who are speaking truth to power today? Who are the prophets of our time who call out the injustice and corruption of our institutions and warn us of the consequences of our comfortable inaction? Who is making you uncomfortable? Is it perhaps an environmental scientist, with dire warnings about climate change? Perhaps it's an economist, who warns that our current financial system is unsustainable? Or perhaps it's a modern prophet who sees the increasing irrelevancy of the institutional church in the postmodern world?

Amos calls us to listen to the extremists among us and measure their words, and our own actions, against the divine plumb line. Amos also reminds us that, even as ordinary people, we too are called by God to speak truth to power and afflict the comfortable even though we may be labeled agitators, traitors, and extremists. Let us answer the call, then, and have the courage to be extremists for love and justice. Amen.