

“The Prophets Motive”

One technique that educators use in the classroom, especially when teaching people a new concept or area of study is to find something they are familiar with to hang it on. I am fond of using movie references for this purpose. For this scene from Amos I am reminded of a classic western movie (I call this “The Prophet Fight at the Temple Beth El.”) Amos is like the US Marshall come to town to take on the corrupt local sheriff, Amaziah, and the cattle baron, Jeroboam. Amos tells Amaziah that he and the boss have been treating the townsfolk “a might poorly,” and that just won’t do. When Amaziah tells the big boss “the land is not able to bear all [of Amos] words.” He is saying, “Pardner this town ain’t big enough for the both of us.”

Amos responds, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” Translated into western movie dialogue, “I ain’t no gunslinger. I am on a mission from God. You better listen up to what I say ‘cause you is fightin’ with the Lord now.”

As much fun as it is to imagine this scene between the two prophets as a dual in the dusty streets of a Wild West town, there are important issues at stake here. These are issues of how we are to care for one another as God’s people. These were important enough to God to inspire a well-to-do and skilled arborist and breeder, for that is what Amos was, to be a prophet. Amos had to put down the tools of his lucrative trade and travel from his home south of Jerusalem north into the Kingdom of Israel to prophesy to Jews who were not part of his clan.

We should note that date of Amos’ is the middle of the 8th century BCE. At that the kingdom David had put together had split in two—north and south. The Northern Kingdom was called Israel and the Southern Kingdom Judea. In Judea Jerusalem was the center of worship, while in Israel Bethel was the center of worship. The two did not fight each other but they were not friends. God gave Amos the task of prophesying to the Northern Kingdom. We can see that when Amaziah taunts Amos to go back to Judea and make his money prophesying there.

But Amos is not a professional prophet (that is what is meant when Amos says he is not a prophet’s son). Amos is a God-inspired prophet. Amos’s prophecy is a castigation of Israel for its treatment of the poor, orphaned and widowed. He calls on the Northern Kingdom to remember their origins as part of God’s chosen people. They know that they should not take advantage of people for personal gain. They know that they are to forgive debtors not take the clothes off of their backs or shoes from their feet to satisfy a debt. Amaziah and King Jeroboam are unhappy with Amos and want him gone; because he is pointing out that they are living high on the hog at the expense of their own people and contrary to God’s law.

Several years ago the columnist David Brooks published an article in which he cited a short story by Ursula Le Guin¹—“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.”² The story is about an idyllic town, a real utopia as far as an outsider can tell where all live happy, uncomplicated lives. There is one problem with their utopia. In order for it

¹ David Brooks, “The Child in the Basement,” The New York Times, January 12, 2015, page A27.

² Ursula Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” ©1973.

to exist a child must be kept locked in a dark closet in a basement. No one knows why this is required, but all know that it is essential. Many people go on with their lives, some feel it is regrettable, but necessary, and others anguish over it, but choose to live with this communal sin. There are some who walk away. No one knows where they go, but they go away choosing not to live in a place that requires such an atrocity, albeit an atrocity against only one person.

As Brooks points out, there are many ways to read this story.³ One can read it as a fable about exploitation. It can be read as the cost of living in a real world with real dangers that require that some suffer for the greater good. It can be read as the psychological cost of living individually in this world and the toll we bear to maintain a semblance of an integrated self. However we read it, the cost to the one who suffers in the story is at odds with God's Kingdom.

God tells us through Amos, that even if one, seemingly, inconsequential child suffers so that all others may be happy, then we have failed. The breath of God exists in every human being, and every human being is made in the image of God. It is not just those we like, or those we agree with, or those who **we** consider worthy. All have worth.

It is a whole lot easier to say than it is to practice. One on one it is easier, but when I start looking at larger groups of people it becomes harder. Movements, ideologues, religious zealots, political groups, nationalities (doesn't everyone hate the French?) are so much easier to generalize about and demonize than one individual with a face, a name, and a story to tell. Perhaps we can self-justify with concepts and philosophies like utilitarianism, Real-politik, pragmatism, or the common good.

Thankfully for us God is above politics and philosophies. God is not a democrat or a republican or any other political label. God is God. God does not discriminate or stereotype in the way humans do. God's is above all of that. God finds that from time to time it is necessary to send an Amos, Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, Jr. to get us back on the right track again. God sends these people to point to the way that is God's way and not the way of the world. Sometimes these people are ignored, or killed or coopted.

But as Shakespeare wrote, "Truth will out."⁴ We may kill them, or ignore them, or co-opt them for our own uses, but the truth that the prophets speak cannot be silenced. They spoke the undeniable word of God. We have a choice, just as the people of Omelas did. We can hear the word, shrug our shoulders, and ignore it. We can accept the word, but ultimately let it dry up. We can accept the word and follow it where it leads. I would add that we can be mobilized by the word and rescue the child even at our own peril.

When conflict arises listen for God. I believe we come here each week with the hope that through worship each week your ear and your life is becoming more finely tuned to God. We don't want to be the bad guy who exploits the poor, widowed and orphaned for our own satisfaction. We want to be ones who hear the word and live it. We are the ones who will not tolerate the sin of a lonely child in the dark room for some ideology or false utopia. We are the ones who can acknowledge our sins and

³ Brooks.

⁴ William Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice."

repent. That is why we read still listen to Amos 2,800 years after he spoke his words and use them to remind us that as he wrote

Seek the LORD and live,...

Seek good, and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.

Hate evil, and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;...

...let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like a mighty stream.⁵

⁵ Amos 5:8,14-15,24 (author translation)