

Called to be Prophets

Amos 7:10-15

The text for the address today is based on the Old Testament reading from the book of Amos in chapter 7. Let me just read the latter verses of that portion once again.

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said,

‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.’”

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵ and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’

Let us pray.

Lord, open our ears to hear your Word. Encourage us and equip us to go and speak your Word. Amen.

We Lutherans have a doctrine called the “Universal Priesthood of All Believers”. Christ died once and for all, for the sins of all mankind; and now all Christians can function as priests, declaring the forgiveness of Christ to one another. And following Christ’s example, then, we can give ourselves in service to one another. That, in its very, very briefest terms is the doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers — that’s our priestly ministry.

But something that’s perhaps not so often talked about in Lutheran circles is our *prophetic* ministry. We can all think of prophets in the Old Testament: men like Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, just to name a few of them. We know they were spokesmen for God who boldly proclaimed God’s Word. But does God still call people to be prophets today?

In the Gospel reading for last Sunday, which included Jesus sending his disciples out to proclaim his message, it tells us that we *do* have a prophetic ministry; that those of us who are followers of Jesus are called to be his spokespeople.

To understand our text, we need to know something about the situation and the time in which Amos lived. It was during the 8th century BC, shortly after Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, north and south. The northern kingdom took on the name Israel and the southern kingdom became known as Judah. And Amos came from the southern kingdom of Judah, but he was called by God to go and deliver a message to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Jeroboam II was the king in the northern kingdom. It was a time of great prosperity, economic prosperity; but there was also great injustice in the land. The rich gained there power at the expense of the poor. Religious observance had become a mere empty ritual. In fact, Jeroboam II and his father before him, Jeroboam I, had set up a sanctuary at Bethel, as well as numerous other sanctuaries scattered about the country, so people could go there to worship God. Previously, people had gone south to Jerusalem, to the temple, to worship God. But Jerusalem was in the southern kingdom, and so in order to discourage people from going south, Jeroboam set up altars all around the country.

But as well as this, he also erected golden calves and altars to the heathen god Baal, and he encouraged the incorporation of Baal worship into the worship of the true God.

Amaziah was the priest at Bethel, who served also as a kind of chaplain to the royal court. He sent a report to the king that Amos had been telling people that the king would soon be killed and the country would be destroyed and the people would be taken away into exile. Now to Amaziah, this was treason. He accused Amos of plotting the destruction of his country. He told him to go back to Judah, and to earn this living as a prophet there, and never to come back again. Amos replied that he was no professional prophet, whose desire it was to make money out of his preaching. In fact, he wasn't a full-time prophet at all. He was a shepherd and a keeper of sycamore trees who was especially called by God to proclaim his message. And so his message therefore came from God.

Amos was no charlatan. He wasn't in the business of prophesy for his own gain. Humanly speaking, he had nothing to win and everything to lose by leaving his former occupation and going to preach a message of doom in a country that wasn't even his own. But God called him to be a prophet.

Unlike Amaziah, who was in the empty of the king and therefore proclaimed messages that were soothing and that the king would want to hear, Amos wasn't the professional prophet who said what people wanted to hear; but in simple and direct language, he proclaimed a message that God gave to him, even if it meant offending his audience.

What this passage from the book of Amos shows us is that a prophet of God is someone whom God touches, who may even be taken out of his or her livelihood, and is called on to speak on God's behalf. And furthermore, that person is called to speak a message that may not always be comfortable or soothing. A true prophet is not one who seeks material gain or recognition from others, but one who speaks what God has laid on his or her heart.

Our prophetic ministry is a call from God. It is God who calls us, and who sends us out to be his disciples and spokespeople. And when God calls, he also empowers. Amos, I said, was not a professional prophet; he was a layman. But he could speak with the authority of God, because God called him.

In last week's Gospel reading, we heard how Jesus sent out his disciples to proclaim his Word and to cast out evil spirits. Those disciples didn't speak by themselves, but they spoke with the authority of Christ. When we speak God's Word, we too speak with God's authority. For God, who made us his own in baptism, calls us to be his prophets, his spokesmen and women, in the world. And therefore when we speak his Word, we speak with his authority.

When God's prophets speak out, they challenge the accepted mores and values of the day. Amos wasn't afraid to speak out against the popularly-held views of his time. On the surface, everything was well in the northern kingdom of Israel. It was a time of wealth and prosperity. Cultural life flourished, religious life appeared to be going smoothly (on the surface at least). But Amos saw

beyond that. He saw the exploitation of the poor that was taking place. He saw the political intrigue and corruption in high places, and the hollowness of conventional religious practice, and the mixing of true and false elements in the worship at the various altars around the country. And he spoke out loudly and strongly, even against the established authorities.

A true prophet of God challenges and questions the mores of the day. There are aspects of our society that we ought to be questioning. If we cannot do it individually, then collectively, we should be speaking out for justice and truth and morality. For example, how fair is our society when it allows the heads of big business corporations to be paid multi-million dollar salaries while the lowest-paid workers in the company receive a pittance, barely enough to put food on their tables. Or how fair is the justice system in our country when those who can afford to hire a really smart barrister often get off with lighter sentences than those that cannot afford that kind of legal defence. Or what does it say about the morals of our society when it holds up in adulation as role models, first class cricketers who cheat or sledge the opposition with all manner of foul talk; or star footballers who get uncontrollably drunk and then treat women as sex toys. Why are we bombarded every day by all manner of moral filth and violence on our television screens?

These are just some of the values, the warped and the twisted values of our society that we ought to be challenging.

Amos was able to speak directly to the king's representatives. Some of us may be able to make our voice heard in high places. But all of us can make our voices heard in the community where we are. All of us can speak out for what is true and honest and honourable. All of us can speak up for Christian values. And even more importantly, all of us can live by the Christian values that we espouse.

Always the will of God must be paramount. Where there is injustice or evil, God's prophets speak out. They are champions of the poor, the oppressed, and the powerless. Prophets are so zealous in their calling that they are prepared to risk even their own safety and well-being as they carry out their prophetic ministry.

In today's Gospel, we heard how John the Baptist spoke out for what was right, even though it cost him prison and finally cost him his life. God's prophets are courageous and bold: they attack with God's authority those who do wrong and those who promote evil and injustice.

That's the kind of prophetic ministry to which we are called. We are called to keep our ears open, to be sensitive to what is going on in the world around us, and God empowers us for this task. We can speak with a God-given courage and authority. Always God's Word must be the measure with which we gauge our society, and the truth of his Word must prevail.

You and I are called to be prophets, to let the truth of God's Word be heard.

Amen.