

Prophets, Priests, and Plumb Lines

LaGrave Avenue CRC

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Amos 7:7-17

Tonight we open God's Word to the Old Testament book of Amos. The Revised Common Lectionary lists this passage as one of the Old Testament readings for this weekend, and since I haven't spent much time in Amos for a while, I thought we could do that together tonight. So let's read together from Amos 7:7-17.

As I studied this week, I was reminded of a public interaction between Pastor John MacArthur and author and speaker Beth Moore in the fall of 2019. What happened was that MacArthur made a spontaneous and dismissive remark in response to the name "Beth Moore" in an interview as he celebrated his 50 year preaching career. MacArthur said that Moore should "go home," meaning that she should not use her voice or her ministry gifts during Sunday worship because her gender made her unsuitable for that task. The other pastors interacting with him outdid each another as they commented about Moore and women as leaders in church and society. Moore responded by saying that she did not surrender to a human calling when she dedicated her life to Christian ministry as a young adult. And she said that she would "follow Jesus, and Jesus alone, all the way home."

It was a sad day for the Big-C church to see high-profile, influential voices in American Christian subculture undercut Moore, whose ministry has encouraged countless Christians to open, understand, and listen to God's Word. There is room for dissenting views about the biblical qualifications for ministry without disparaging a fellow Christian's gifts and service. Up front I should say I'm not suggesting that Moore or MacArthur stand in exactly for the characters in our story. Life and ministry is nuanced, and messy, and God sees things in every heart and life that are out of the public view. But that 2019 exchange between different ministry leaders has some resonance with our passage. Amos the prophet and Amaziah the priest go toe-to-toe under the reign of King Jeroboam in Amos 7. One delivers a message from the Lord for the kingdom of Israel. The other tries to figure out just what to do as the message threatens the established ways and means of national worship.

It's around 760 B.C. in the northern kingdom of Israel, and Amaziah the priest is in a tough spot. He's grown used to coming into the temple at Bethel every morning with a spring in his step and a song in his heart. Because all seems well in Israel, and Amaziah is not doing too bad for himself either. By all accounts, the long reign of King Jeroboam II has been wildly successful. The headlines tell the story: "Jeroboam Conquers Damascus: Israel's Territory Largest in History" "Economic Outlook Bright as Phoenicia and Egypt Sign Trade Agreement." "Census Bureau Reports Israelites Living Longer; Having Bigger Families." Prominent citizens have grown wealthy. Amaziah certainly can't complain about the trickle down effect on the temple's bottom line. Yes, all was going just fine...until Amos came. This prophet from the Southern Kingdom is a grade-A disturber of the peace and a pain in the priest's neck. Amaziah lets himself into the temple courts. Amos isn't there yet, but the priest can picture him standing there, antagonizing him.

"This is what the LORD says" Amos would say. "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample

on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.... Now then, I will crush you, as a cart crushes when loaded with grain.” (Amos 2) “I wonder what the message will be today....” Amaziah mutters.

In the months since Amos has been around Bethel, the grim messages have only intensified. In fact, just recently, Amos announced that the Sovereign Lord’s unrelenting justice is coming, sooner rather than later: This is what the Lord says: “Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. “The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.” Amaziah decides he’s had just about enough of this prophet. He summons his authority as the local religious head, sits down at his desk, and pens a letter.

Dear King Jeroboam:

I thought it worth your attention, O King, to send word that the prophet Amos is conspiring against you, right here from the heart of your kingdom.

In my view the national interests are at stake. Amos claims that you’ll be killed by the sword, and that Israel is going into exile. I’m sure you’ll agree this needs to stop. We can’t have him threatening your life.

I await your orders. Your devoted servant,
Amaziah

Amaziah seals the letter and sends it with a courier. And while he waits for word from Jeroboam he calls Amos in for a meeting. He does not offer Amos a glass of water. He does not ask him to sit down. “Amos of Tekoa, so-called prophet,” Amaziah says, “Get out. Go home. Run away to Judah and don’t come back.” Just how did Amaziah the priest find himself here: in a public confrontation with the prophet of God Judah? Aren’t priests and prophets members of the same team?

To answer that, we have to go back a long time. About two hundred years before Amos and Amaziah, King Jeroboam I ruled as the first king of Israel under a divided monarchy. That King Jeroboam inaugurated a day that would live in infamy. As Jeroboam thought about the ten northern tribes making pilgrimages south to Jerusalem to worship at Solomon’s temple, he got anxious. You can read about it in 1 Kings 12.

So Jeroboam I subjected the worship of Yahweh to his own interests for the new nation of Israel. He took it upon himself to establish worship centers, without God’s permission, within his own borders. Shrines with golden calves in two Israelite towns now served worshippers closer to home. One of those worship centers was right there in Bethel. The writer of 1 Kings doesn’t sugarcoat the situation when he says, “This thing became a sin” a fault line running through Israelite faith.

If you go on to read more of 1 and 2 Kings you’ll see lots of references to the “sin of Jeroboam.” Worship of a golden calf is part of that. But so was the appointment of priests. Jeroboam I took an unorthodox approach to staffing the temple. No longer was the priesthood reserved for Levites only as God had instructed; anyone the king appointed could be a priest. Who could blame kings for appointing loyal subjects to positions of influence?

So, enter Amaziah, all these years later, serving at the shrine in Bethel. He's inherited worship traditions that answer to the king rather than to God. He's heir to an anemic relationship with the Sovereign Lord. He doesn't see himself as an intercessor for the people before the Lord, and he doesn't see himself as a representative of the Lord to the people. The most priestly thing about him is his title. The way he thinks about the temple and worship is clear when he says to Amos, "This is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom" (Amos 7:13). For all the distortions of true worship of God in the land of Israel, Amaziah speaks true. The temple at Bethel wasn't constructed under the Lord's direction or even for the Lord. It stands in service to Israel's king.

So what happens when the priests no longer know the LORD? What happens when God's people show by their lives that they don't know him at all? God could have left his people alone to wreck their nation and ruin their lives, taking the posture of a fed-up parent who says, "I don't know what to do with you anymore! I guess you're on your own." He's been forbearing a long time. But God doesn't do that. When the priest who should have represented God to the people fails, God sends a prophet - in this case, a foreign prophet, no less. He will not leave them alone. That truth is both sobering and freeing for me as a pastor: When pastors fail to faithfully represent God to you or you to God, which is inevitable because they're human, God will show up to call you home in some other way!

After being told by a faithless priest to go back home, Amos answers Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' "MY people, Israel." So here he comes, Amos, plumb line in hand, holding it up right in the heart of Israel. He shows them just how out of true they are, how badly they need saving.

Through this conflict between priest and prophet, through all the words of judgment that Amos is delivering for God, the LORD pursues his people. He chases them down not with a soft and tender love but with a love that roars. Amos isn't the first or last person to find himself caught between the authorities and the inner compass of the still small voice of God. He's not the first person or last person to find that human life is out of joint when measured by God's standards.

So how do we, the people of God, navigate the tensions between our faithfulness to God and living as broken people in a broken world? When your workplace has certain expectations and your conscience has others, living faithfully is hard. When your family values togetherness and questions your sense of call to something that will take you away, living faithfully is hard. It takes humility and the light of God's Word and Spirit for us to recognize we can't live up to God's standards, that we did and do, and will always need a Savior, and that those around us do too! It takes prayer and courage to find our way with God in the face of opposition. And it takes discernment with trusted, godly people. And other past heroes of our faith we may come to a place where we have to say, "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me."

Jewish tradition holds that although King Jeroboam respected Amos as a prophet, the priest Amaziah lost patience. The tradition is that Amos preached God's messages for perhaps a year, and that he was executed by Amaziah. Amos's name means "burden." He bore that burden of God's message until he died.

800 years later another man made a journey from far away into the temple courts, this time in Jerusalem. Like Amos, he came teaching and preaching only what the Father gave him to say. Like Amos, he came opposing any authority that set itself over or against the one true God.

Like Amos, he came with a burden for his people that cost him his life. And while today we've read about a conflict between a prophet and a priest, while we lament the conflicts we see in human Christian leaders today. In Jesus, there is no conflict between the roles of prophet and priest, and king. Because he inhabits all three offices at the same time, and does it perfectly. No one else can. As prophet, Jesus speaks the clear-eyed truth about our sin and alienation from God and calls us to turn back to God. As priest, he not only intercedes for us but actually laid himself down as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. And as our highest king his rule makes us new as suitable citizens of the kingdom he's in charge of. Such a Prophet, Priest, and King is worthy of our highest praise.

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