

ARE WE PROPHETS?

Amos 7:7-17, 8:1-12

Midland UCC

Luke 10:25-37

July 14, 2019

Back in 1903, George Bernard Shaw, in his 'Revolutionist's Handbook' quoted a French novelist who seems to be the source of a French Proverb which tells us that "The more things change, the more they stay the same." I want to invite you this morning to explore how such a proverb can help us understand the times in which we live and what we are called to do in such a time.

Our Old Testament lesson for this morning quotes a couple of passages from the prophet Amos. Amos lived in Palestine about 2,780 years ago. At that time there were two kingdoms that would eventually become Israel. One of these was already named Israel and the other was Judah. There had been a sustained period of peace in the area at that time. Jeroboam, the king of the kingdom of Israel, ruled for 40 years. During his time in office, his country seemed to prosper, but that prosperity was mostly the property of the upper echelons of society. There was an economic stratification of society. I'll come back to this in a moment.

There was also in those days a practice for the royal household to have its own official prophets who were usually part of a group of people who made it their business to support the authorities. In the case of the king of Israel, the chief priest named Amaziah was the spokesperson. The prophet Amos vehemently denied he was such a person. We may call him a prophet, but he didn't call himself that.

I spent my early childhood in the town of Eaton Rapids, Michigan, which is a bit south of Lansing. I was four years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed, and we were into World War II. Many physicians were drafted to serve in the military and little towns, like my hometown, were severely impacted by that. For several years there was only one physician in town—who apparently did an early stint in the war and then came back to care for our little town. The reality of the time made him seem indispensable and he felt free to share his sharp tongue

with folks from time to time. In one historic encounter, he was told point blank by a rather wealthy woman that her place in society entitled her to preferential treatment. He didn't appreciate the comment and told her that not only does the cream rise to top of the milk pail, but so does the scum. That physician and Amos seem to be cut from the same stock.

I want to offer you a bit of a parable informed by Amos and his mission. The United States and Canada of the present day might be compared with Israel and Judah of Amos' time. While the modern countries are much larger geographically, I choose them for my parable because they have similar (although not identical) languages and cultures and it is relatively easy to move across the common border.

Here we go: Imagine that the rose garden at the White House is being prepared for a presidential press conference—you know, one of those things which starts out with some sort of Presidential statement. Amos comes wandering across the lawn obviously headed for the press conference. He gets stopped by Amaziah, the president's press secretary: "hey there mister, you're not allowed here, you're not one of the credentialed reporters." Amos replies: "I'm not a reporter, I'm the guy who mows the lawn and trims the shrubbery. God spoke to me and sent me to deliver a message to the president." The press secretary is quite firm: "you can't be here with your stupid fake news; with your accent you sound a bit like a Canadian. I think you should go to Ottawa to deliver your message." Amos will have none of this. He tells the press secretary that your attitude will result in your wife becoming a prostitute and you are the one that will be out of here. You guys are destroying the nation with your junk science and your lack of compassion and mercy. There is no justice here. Corruption abounds in the government and the common people are in great pain because of it."

I wonder if some reporters might catch up with this ahead of the press conference and publish some reports about Amos in the Rose Garden.

Careful reading of the words of Amos reveals concern about the way the government of Israel is corrupting the fundamental values of Israel's historic faith. Amos talks about officials manipulating the currency for their own benefit, distorting the scales used to weigh produce

and trying to convince the poor that the chaff from the threshing of wheat is actually good for them to eat. He talks about the leadership complaining about and bending the rules about the sabbath and other holy days so they can have more opportunities to make money. He tells us that the poor are sold for silver and the needy for the price of a pair of sandals. There may be no war against foreign threats, but there is a war within the country with the privileged class opposing the much larger and more desperate underclass.

Amos feels some urgency about delivering his message and clearly was running a lot of risks, just a modern Amos would by intruding in the White House Rose garden. He was a bit clever about how he delivered his message. For example, when Amaziah tried to get rid of him, he said “your wife will become a prostitute.” That is probably a veiled death threat implying that the woman would have no economic resources if Amaziah was dead. However, if Amos was accused of making death threats, he could easily have denied it.

The junk science pedaled by this administration trying to convince people that the chaff from the wheat harvest was nutritious was no better than the folks in our time who deny climate change. This gets done even though places in Alaska last week experienced record temperatures while torrential rains in the heartland are turning farming into an ongoing disaster. Recent proposals to move the federal Environmental Protection Agency out of Washington, D.C. have been offered in the name of sharing the impact of the federal spending with various states: behind this seems to be an effort to disrupt the flow of information to and from the EPA. Even worse, there are politicians who legislate junk science to protect their own hides and garner votes. For example, several states, including North Dakota, have passed laws requiring physicians to tell women seeking abortions that the process is reversible. There is absolutely no scientific support for this mean-spirited legislation. Physicians who attempt to follow the law would be violating the Hippocratic Oath which says “first, do no harm.”

My metaphor about Amos being a reporter actually diminishes the significance of his role as a prophet. Reporters, editors and columnists may offer us news and opinions,

however, their criticisms come from outside the system. Prophets come forth from within the system, not to criticize it but to invite reformation from within. Modern prophets need to ask questions. The kind of questions that encourage people to examine their own motives, to uncover the principles that motivate their behavior.

Richard Rohr is a contemporary Roman Catholic theologian and Walter Brueggemann is a UCC theologian. In a recent column about the role of prophets, Rohr quotes Brueggemann about prophets and their responsibility for imagining new visions; he concludes thusly:

“The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The *imagination* must come before the *implementation*. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus, every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one. . . .” [R. Rohr, July 11, 2019]

We are called to be prophets, to keep alive a ministry of imagination and one way to do this is to ask questions. We need to ask why it is that nearly 100 women died trying to escape Venezuela in boats for a better life in the brothels of Trinidad. We need to ask why one of this country’s wealthiest men has been arrested for sexually abusing children. We need to ask why these poor victims are being sold for the price of a pair of sandals. If we deprive hurting people of health insurance, aren’t we selling the poor for silver to enrich others?

There are questions about moral principles to be asked. For example, there are lots of things going on that seem to testify to the notion that the end justifies the means. That report of the junk science being used to oppose abortion rights is exactly that. Similar thinking seems to go on regarding the plight of refugees who seek asylum at our southern border. Recent

reports that the Federal Reserve is proposing to make adjustments again in interest rates would seem to belie the assertion that restrictive trade policies will provide economic stimulus. One of the unexpected problems with believing that the end justifies the means is to suppose that the end being sought is good for everyone.

Amos is important for us to understand because it seems clear that the more things change, the more they stay the same. There are a host of parallels between this moment in our own history and what was going on in Israel nearly 3,000 years ago. Amos and Jesus stand in the same tradition: they are prophets who ask questions, who challenge the standard ways of doing things, and who advocate for society's victims for whom no one will speak.

I want to quote Fr. Rohr again: "Prophets, by their very nature, cannot be at the center of any social structure. Rather, they are "on the edge of the inside." They cannot be full insiders, but they cannot throw rocks from outside either. A true prophet must be educated inside the system, knowing and living the rules, before they can critique what is non-essential or not so important. Jesus did this masterfully. This is what Martin Luther King, Jr. taught the United States, what Gandhi taught British-occupied India, and what Nelson Mandela taught apartheid South Africa."

John Lennon put the challenge this way:

Imagine there's no heaven
 It's easy if you try
 No hell below us
 Above us only sky
 Imagine all the people
 Living for today.

Imagine there's no countries
 It isn't hard to do
 Nothing to kill or die for
 And no religion, too
 Imagine all the people
 Living life in peace.

You may say that I'm a dreamer
 But I'm not the only one
 I hope someday you'll join us
 And the world will be as one.

Imagine no possessions
 I wonder if you can
 No need for greed or hunger
 A brotherhood of man
 Imagine all the people
 Sharing all the world.

You may say that I'm a dreamer
 But I'm not the only one
 I hope someday you'll join us
 And the world will live as one.

Amos and Jesus (who dared say that the hated Samaritans were good) invite and challenge us to be prophets who imagine with our hearts first, who dream outside the conventional boxes and who will be change agents so that perhaps we will be able to disprove that proverb that the more things change, the more they are the same. Let us become prophets with imaginative questions to pose so that we can make a difference, so that we can make love come alive. If we commit to providing a *ministry of imagination*, we could even say to the junk science and the morality of political convenience that we are here to share a vision of the resurrection of truth. When we provide a ministry of imagination, we will recall the world to “the better ways that somehow our souls forgot.” * Amen.

*Words from the song “Life Means So Much” by Chris Rice and sung at the service by Andy Ault.

