

Once upon a time there was a man named Amos.

He is listed among the twelve so-called minor prophets of the Old Testament. He is a ‘minor’ prophet not because he is lacking in importance, but because only remnants and fragments of his work survive.

Although he is designated a prophet, he denied the title and described himself as a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees.

And for your Biblical information: A ‘dresser of sycamore trees’ (and these are not like the sycamore trees we know) cultivated these trees which had small fig-like fruit to help the fruit ripen.

In other words, Amos was a rancher and a farmer, a man of the land, not a professional prophet or priest.

We know he came from a little town, Tekoa, not far from Jerusalem. But that’s about all we know about Amos, at least what would show up on his picture ID.

What’s important for us as we listen to Amos is to know that he was a blunt man, very plainspoken, didn’t mince words.

He preached judgment, as he lays it out, “The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem...I will not revoke punishment...”

Amos didn’t spare anyone. He went down the whole list of nations from Damascus to Moab, and that was all right with the Israelites, “Lay it on those foreigners who seek to destroy our nation.”

But the problem was that Amos didn’t stop there. He says, “*Thus says the Lord, for three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...*”

That was not all right.

For one thing, Amos was from the Southern Kingdom, and he had come north to Bethel, straight to the sanctuary of the King.

It’s bad enough to have your own people questioning the social order, talking judgment and change. But when an outsider gets into the act, it’s downright intolerable.

And another thing, he was so wrong in his predictions of doom, as any fool could plainly see.

Life was going great for Israel under King Jeroboam II. The gross national product was up. Israel was prosperous, even at peace for the most part.

And into that confident, optimistic environment of Israel’s life, Amos let loose with his harsh words about judgment and catastrophe: “*Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel... ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.’*”

Not only was he an outsider, he wasn’t even a gentleman. Listen to his words about the well-fed ladies of Israel: “*Hear this word, you cows of Bashan...who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’*”

And if that wasn’t bad enough, he opened up with both barrels on the religious institutions in Israel.

Bethel was a holy place, Gilgal was a significant shrine, and he left no sarcastic stone unturned: “*Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression... I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs, to the melody of your harps I will not listen.*”

I think it would be safe to say that Amos was no fan of a Worship and Music Conference! And I doubt Amos was invited to serve as a contributor of the revised Book of Common Worship for Presbyterians!

Tact, tolerance, discretion, diplomacy. None of those words would be used to describe Amos.

But we're not going to leave Amos scowling once upon a time in Israel.

You see, there was deep compassion in this man. His harsh words were spoken out of concern and out of passion.

The name Amos means 'burden bearer.'

The burden of the unprivileged and the underprivileged was carried in the name of a God whose standard of measurement was social righteousness.

He denounced the prosperity of the rich because he saw the grinding poverty of the poor.

He condemned the greed of the few because he was haunted by the pinched faces of the many.

He lamented injustice because he knew no society could endure when injustice remained at the core of it.

Amos had a vision from God in which the Lord was holding a plumb line next to a wall. And God told Amos that plumb line measured the degree of the deviation from what was true and right in God's eyes.

That plumb line was symbolic of God's standards of righteousness held against walls built by sinful human hands and hearts, walls of pride and affluence and greed.

This prophetic word of Amos on the ethics of faith was nothing new in the life of Israel.

But it had been somewhat silenced by two streams of popular religion that kept flowing through society.

One was the belief that God's covenant with Israel meant that God would defend Israel come what may.

God was on Israel's side, right or wrong.

And the other strand of popular belief was that the important things in religious experience were its ceremonial practices, worship the right way, the right words and the right people saying them.

Against both, Amos spoke out with all the power of his being, and his words have found their way into our times, our lives: *"But let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

That burden of indignation against human deprivation and oppression and persecution was one Amos would never set aside.

Nor did he set aside his vision of a God whose concern was for all people.

He was the first of the great spiritual leaders of Israel who explicitly set the vision of God free from the bonds of nationalism.

*"Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?" says the Lord. "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?"*

Amos is boldly suggesting that Ethiopia in the faraway valley of the Nile with people so different from the Hebrews was as precious as Israel.

And he has the audacity to compare God's leading of the Israelites out of Egypt to God leading the Philistines, those mortal enemies, out of Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir!

Does God not have any borders?

Those words about Egypt were probably the last words that Amos spoke, at least his last recorded words.

Amos made this one speech to the king, that's the book of Amos, and then the King said, "Get lost," and Amos got lost.

We don't know what happened to him, whether anybody really listened to him, except somebody kept what he said, and he ended up in the collection of Minor Prophets.

Except, the Book of Amos is minor in the same way that the Gettysburg Address is minor; both are relatively short.

But both are major in the same sort of way. They present a transforming and compelling vision of human society where peace and prosperity are rooted in ethics and equality.

There is an Amos quality in all true faith: a straight-talking, truth-telling, no-holds-barred man like Amos, who understands right from wrong and is not afraid to say so.

We usually think about prophetic vision as foresighted, as seeing forward. In common usage, prophecy is about predicting future tribulations, revelations, or football scores.

But prediction is not the focus of biblical prophecy.

Rather, as the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel points out, biblical prophecy is "insighted," not "foresighted."

Biblical prophecy is insightful; it is about "seeing through."

The prophet sees through the veil of appearances to glimpse a different reality.

In his book, "The Prophetic Imagination," Walter Brueggemann says that the prophet sees what is but doesn't accept that this is what must be.

The prophet is able to imagine a what-could-be and vividly describes that image so that others can see it as well.

The defenders of the status quo would dismiss the prophet's vision as an idealistic fantasy that will never work in the "real world."

But the prophet sees his or her vision not only as what could be, but also as what must be.

And then actively works to bring it to pass.

Amid these turbulent and uncertain times, it is crucial that we consider what prophets we are listening to.

Or as Amos would say it once upon our time: Those who invoke the name and power of God to bless a society cannot live as if God does not know or does not care about or will not judge how we *"let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.