"And the Lord took me from following after the sheep, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel." - Amos 7:15

These words sound as if they maight have been spoken amidst the peaceful atmosphere of some old fashioned prayer meeting. They have about them the flavor of a beautiful intimacy that befits the inner circle of the saints. But such is not the case. They were spoken in the heat of controversy. They were spoken amidst hot antagonism. They are the words of a free lance prophet whose unconventional conduct is being challenged by a thoroughly conventional priest.

I.

Look at the situation. Look at the background of these words. The scene is the temple, the great state church at Bethel. This church is a kind of royal chapel. The priest speaks of it later as belonging not to Jehovah but to the king. It is a high day in Bethel and the church is thronged by many seeming worshippers. Nor are these worshippers ordinary folks. They are the economically and socially prosperous of the land.

The official priest is a man named Amaziah. He is doubtless a man of considerable ability and charm. He has probably won his high place partly because of his gifts but more because he has been able to win royal favor. But regardless of how he won his place, his is a position of such distinction as to make him the envy of the lesser clergy. He is no doubt suave, tactful, safe. He can be trusted not to offend any member of his congregation. Especially can he be trusted to look after the interest of his kingdom.

Now while this service was proceeding in the safe and conventional manner,
while the rich were offering their sacrifices and bringing their tithes into
the storehouse, there was an interruption. A stranger stands up to speak. Perhaps
none of them has ever seen him before. But he has not spoken a moment before every
eye is fixed upon him. This was due in part to the fact that they were taken by
surprise. It was due more to the personality of the speaker. His dress and
brogue proclaimed him a rustic but anyone can see that he is no ordinary man.

His language is simple and pictorial. He is at once a poet and an orator.
Then he knows crowd psychology as if he had made it a lifetime study. Soon he
has the eager attention of everyone present.

How does he compel these strangers who are naturally a bit unfriendly and
susicious to hear him so gladly? The art of catching an audience at the very
beginning of an address is a happy art. Some do this by telling a joke, but not
so with this man. I doubt if he ever saw a joke in his life. I doubt if he
ever saw anything funny in his life. Some win favor by dealing out a few skilled
compliments, but this preacher wasn't good at complimenting. How then did he win?
He begins by rebuking Israel's neighbors. He takes them up one by one, saying
for three transgressions, or four I will not turn them away. As he pronounced
judgment upon those whom Israel hates, the hearts of his hearers grow warm toward
him. "What a preacher!", they say. "If I could hear a sermon every Sabbath I
would never miss." Then just as he has them eating out of his hand, so to speak,
when all their defenses are down, he fetches them a blow that at first stuns and
bewilders them and then causes them to blaze with anger. Safe and same Amaziah
simply cannot stand it. He has never heard anything so shocking in his life.
He breaks in on the speaker, "Stop it", he says, "you can't do that to us. This
is the King's chapel." Then he adds with a sneer, "Go back to Judah and prophesy
and earn your bread there. I know you are in this thing just for the money. You
are just a professional prophet who preaches for revenue only, but you will get
nothing here so you might as well go home."
At this the burning eyes of the speaker burned yet more. He turns upon Amaziah with an indignation even hotter than that of the Priest himself and answers: "I am no prophet, neither do I belong to a prophet's guild. I am not where I am by any human appointment. I am not the chaplain of any earthly king. The Lord took me from following after the sheep, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy to my people Israel." With this the speaker ended. He was certain in his mind of this fact. He had understood it from the very first day to the very last day. He had understood it in his message because it became him to understand through the passing of the years. Who is this disturbing preacher?

He is a man by the name of Amos. He is the first of the writing prophets. He, therefore, inaugurated a new era. He is known as one of the minor prophets. He is not minor however in the sense of being of small importance. What is minor about him has to do with the quantity of his work rather than its quality. Amos left behind him only a few glittering fragments. His sermons are little more than brief and broken outlines. Yet as brief and meager as his contribution is so far as quantity is concerned, its quality is enormous. In fact he said in germ, regarding the matter he treated, about all that has been say by the greatest of thinkers during the centuries since his death. He is therefore in the strictest sense not a minor prophet but one of the very greatest.

This prophet was a native of Tekoa, a little village on the edge of the wilderness twelve miles south of Jerusalem. His was "a desolate and haggard country". It was rugged, poor and dangerous. In this wild land Amos gave himself to the task of a herdsman, supplementing his meagre earnings by dressing sycamore trees. The sycamore of Amos' experience was not like ours. It was a tree that bore a fig-like fruit. This fruit is not very palatable at its best, but it is made more tasty provided it is pinched and bruised while still on the tree. Amos therefore earned his living by keeping sheep and tending this rather poor fruit.

This rugged land of conflict made its contribution to the prophet. Something of its sturdy strength entered into his own heart. He reminds me of Peter.
Cartwright, that pioneer prophet of the wilderness who was born a little more than a century and a-half ago. Amos was far able than this more modern prophet, but they both possessed a rugged courage that fitted them to serve their day. It is said that Cartwright rose to preach one Sunday morning in the pulpit of McKendree Church of Nashville, Tennessee. Just as he was taking his text, the pastor saw General Andrew Jackson in the church. Fearing that this crude backwoodsman might say something to offend the General, he pulled his coat and whispered, "General Jackson is here." "Who is General Jackson?" asked the shocked minister, "I want to tell the General that unless he repents of his sins he will go to hell just like anybody else." To that preaching, I am sure Amos would have said "Amen".

But the fact that Amos came from the backwoods does not mean that he was backward in his thinking. The fact that he had lived on the edge of the wilderness in a little village does not mean that he had a village mind. The truth is that he was a world citizen. He was an internationalist. So far as I know he is the first real internationalist that we meet on the pages of history. His message does not deal with Israel only but with the nations outside of Israel. He has a world view. His interests reached as far as humanity.

How he became an internationalist, we are not definitely told. It is due in part, I am sure, to the fact that, living in the country, he had to go again and again to the city to sell his wool. Here he brought that fine capacity for observing that he had cultivated in the wilderness. Here he was clearly a man with insight. Here too he doubtless met merchants and travelers from other and distant lands. Amos was a man of eager mind. The silence of the wilderness had made him a good listener. He heard intelligently what these had to say of the lands and cities from whence they came. But above all else Amos owed his world citizenship to his knowledge of God. Every nation in that distant day had its own gods. Israel was no exception. But Amos had come to realize that God was not the God of Israel only but of the whole world. He is Lord of Hosts. It was
natural, therefore, for this man who was a worshipper of the God of the whole world to be a world citizen.

Finally Amos was a man made dynamic by a compelling sense of mission. As Paul centuries later, he confirmed that he had not received his message from man, nor had he received his call to proclaim that message from man. He had been taught it by Almighty God. There is certainly no accounting for Amos on any other terms. He and the other great prophets were not products of their time. They were far above their time. Therefore, he spoke with earnestness and courage because he felt that he had a mighty task. "The Lord took me from following after the sheep, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel." Amos was a backwoods genius, girded for his task by a mighty sense of mission.

III.

The message of this man was mainly a message of rebuke and judgment. He saw the evils of his day with a clear eye and rebuked them with sharp severity. The sins that he rebuked did not belong to his day alone. They belong to our day and to every day. What were some of these sins?

1. He rebuked man's inhumanity to man. He blazed against the cruelty with which one nation warred against another. He rebuked the rich for their oppression of the poor. The era was one of great prosperity but this prosperity was not enriching the many but the few. If a poor man bought so much as a pair of cheap sandals on the credit he ran the risk of being sold into slavery. Against the strong thus taking advantage of the weak, Amos burned with hot anger. "Ye sell the righteous for a piece of silver ---- and the poor for a pair of shoes."

Then he rebukes these greedy grafters for the wicked ways in which they used their ill-gotten gains. Oppression always hurts the oppressed but it seems to hurt the oppressor; even more. These oppressors were squandering that which they wrung from the poor upon luxuries and in dissipation. They were lolling on idle couches and lapping upon bottles of wine. Even the women had their part in this orgy of drunkenness. The prophet in the fierceness of his anger calls
them "cows of Bashan" and suggest that they are aggressors, saying to their husbands "Come let us drink wine".

Along with this oppression and debauchery there was a wide spread indifference to the danger that through their selfishness threatened not only the oppressed but the nation as a whole. "You are not yourselves", he declares, "with the best of the oil, but are indifferent to the wounds of the nation". (Moffatt). The Chinese have a saying we are told that runs like this, "It is not my business" by which they mean it is not my business, it is not my responsibility. That is what these were saying. While they through their greediness were fairly pulling the foundation from under the nation, they were totally indifferent to the ruin they were working.

2. The prophet also rebuked his nation for its self-sufficient pride. As stated above, this was a era of great prosperity. Jeroboam II was on the throne. He was a man of ability. His reign was highly successful but that success had come about not through the blessing of God but through their own merits. "Have we not made horns for ourselves?" they asked arrogantly, by which they mean that they have won in their own strength, that if God had not made the world they would.

Along with this pride of success was a tremendous pride of race. They were the people. God had chosen them because they alone were worth choosing. Against such a view, Amos hurls an indignant protest, "What are you better than the Ethiopians", he asked inviting scorn, "God made them just as much as He made you."

How far this genius was ahead of his time. "It is true", he seems to say, "that God has signally blessed you, are more advantages than others, it is due to Him and not to yourselves. Nor does His blessing mean mere privilege. It means responsibility. 'You alone have I known of all the nations of the earth, therefore shall I judge you for your sins'."

3. Finally, Amos rebuked the people of his day for their blindness. They were blind to the fact that God was a God of Righteousness. Since this was the case, how silly to think that God was interested in ritual rather than righteousness.
How foolish to think that they could buy God off by their ceremonies, that they could appease Him by sharing with Him their ill-gotten gains. Jesus thundered against this wicked stupidity in His day. He knew certain men who robbed widows' houses and sought to atone for their rascality by long prayers. But He made it plain that such mingling of wickedness and worship would not avail but would only bring the greater condemnation.

These people are not only blind in that they tried to substitute ritual for righteousness but because they refused to learn in God's dealing with them in the past. In other days, they had sinned. As a result of their sins, they had suffered. They had known pestilences. They had known famine. But though punished often, they refused to receive correction. They kept biting at the same empty hooks. They did not learn that sin drags suffering in its weight yesterday, today and forever.

They showed their blindness in their enthusiastic expectations of the Day of the Lord, that it should make the triumphant over all their enemies. Whether the Day of the Lord brings heaven or hell to the individual or the nation depends on what that day finds in the individual or the nation. (The sun that shines upon the honeysuckle and changes it into perfume, shines upon another plant and changes it into poison.) The same sun that made the wheat that was sown upon good ground grow and become fruitful, withered the wheat that was sown on shallow soil. Since these people were living outside the will of God, the Day of the Lord was not going to be a day to them that they would like but a day of darkness. In fact, they had willed it. In fact when God put His plumbline alongside what they had built, individually and nationally, He found it out of plumb. Therefore it was doomed to destruction, not simply because God was angry, it was doomed in the nature of things. It was doomed because, as Carlyle said "If you build a lie into a rock wall, it will fall down."
IV.

But while the message of Amos is mainly one of rebuke and judgment, while it is often harsh, it does strike a note of tenderness and hope. I am aware that certain scholars are strong of the opinion that some of the tenderest words that we find in the latter part of the book are interpolations that have been added by another. But if this is true, Amos still offers a deathless hope to his hearers.

"Seek ye me," he pleads on the part of God. "Seek ye me and live." In spite of their sins, there is yet life to be had for the taking, if they would only seek God. It is the same appeal that another prophet made many years later.

"Turn ye, turn yet, for why are yet dying of the House of Israel?" But the seeking that is to avail goes far deeper than mere ritual. When religion loses its inwardness we often seek to make up for that loss by outward pomp and splendor. Seeking to be of value must be like that for which John the Baptist appealed, "Bring forth works worthy of repentance." The repentance for which Amos called and God demands is a repentance that leads to right conduct. Let justice roll down like a river and righteousness as a mighty stream. Thus seeking God and turning from our sins to the doing of His will, we find life this day and in all days.

* * * * *

• • • • •