

Dr. Richard Groves

July 12, 2009

www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

Where Have All the Prophets Gone?

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29

I am fascinated by the biblical prophets. Always have been. What a curious breed they were. The late Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel, who wrote what I consider to be one of the best books about the prophets (The Prophets), described the biblical prophet this way:

The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. (5) To us a single act of injustice – cheating in business, exploitation of the poor – is slight; to the prophet, a disaster. . . . To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions. (4) . . . The prophet is intent on intensifying responsibility, is impatient of excuse, contemptuous of pretense and self-pity. . . . his words are often slashing, even horrid -- designed to shock rather than to edify. (7) The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions. (10) The prophet's ear perceives the silent sigh. (9) (He hears notes) one octave too high (for the rest of us to hear). (7) Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony. . . . (5)

I read Heschel's description of the biblical prophet; I think about some of the remarkable characters who filled the role of prophet in ancient Israel – Hosea buying his unfaithful wife off the slave block in an act symbolizing God's redemption; Jeremiah buying a plot of land in Judah just before it fell to the enemy as a way of saying, "We shall return;" Ezekiel seeing strange visions of wheels within wheels. I recall their monumental pronouncements, like, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). And I wonder: where have all the prophets gone? Are there prophets around today? How would we know a real prophet if we saw one? Those are the questions I would like for us to deal with this morning.

I would like to get at those issues by spending some time with one of the great prophets of ancient Israel – Amos. You may think you don't know Amos, but if you have a memory stored away of Martin Luther King, Jr., thundering, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (5:24), you know Amos, because that was one of his best lines.

The opening verses of the book give us information that is highly important to understanding the prophet and what happened to him, though it might not seem so at first glance: "The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam of Israel. . . ." That puts Amos in the mid-eighth century BCE. Here is the significance of that. One hundred and fifty years earlier the nation of Israel divided into two separate countries, which were sometimes friendly toward one another, sometimes hostile. The northern country retained the name Israel; the southern country adopted the name of its largest tribe, Judah. The book claims to contain the words of Amos "concerning Israel," the northern kingdom. But it also notes that Amos was from Tekoa, a village in Judah. The author is telling us at the outset that Amos is an outsider; he is preaching in a country that isn't his own. He is prophesying to people who are not his people. That becomes a critical factor in the incident that is described in our text.

The message of Amos was simple and straightforward: because of social injustice and religious arrogance on the part of the people, God was going to punish Israel by means of a total military disaster. The destruction of Israel came roughly thirty years later at the hands of Assyria, the newly emerging superpower of

the day, but Amos was convinced that God was simply using the great enemy to the north. “I will rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword,” God said through the prophet (7:9).

Amaziah, the priest at one of the principal worship centers in ancient Israel, the one that was designated as the king’s place of worship, got word of what Amos was saying, and he was appalled. A man of God, well, a purported man of God, saying publicly that our nation is going to be destroyed? What lunacy. We’re at peace. We can’t have religious figures planting seeds of doubt in the minds of the people. That is unpatriotic. It’s treasonous!

So Amaziah went to the king and reported what Amos was saying. Actually, he overstated his case a wee bit when he said, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel.” There was no conspiracy afoot. It was just a lone prophet doing his thing. But there is a particular bent of mind that wants/needs to see a conspiracy behind every threat. Somehow it makes a grave situation seem even more grave, a dangerous situation even more dangerous.

When Amaziah’s mind got into a conspiracy groove, he might well have begun to think: “If Amos is conspiring against the king, he must be conspiring with somebody. You can’t conspire by yourself. Who are his fellow conspirators? Let’s not forget – Amos is a foreigner. Maybe others sneaked into the country with him. Maybe they connected with homegrown dissidents, and they want to create unrest and uncertainty and fear among the people. We must find the others, root them out and make them pay for their treachery.” That may have been the way Amaziah’s mind was working when he left the king.

Amaziah found Amos and told him in no uncertain terms, “Flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there.” Judah, you recall, is where Amos was from. Amaziah was telling him, “Go back to where you came from. Outside agitator! Go home and prophesy there. Don’t prophecy again at this holy place, for it is the worship place of the king.”

I don’t know what Amaziah expected Amos to say or do in response to his direct order; I am quite sure he did not expect what he got.

“You got me all wrong,” Amos said. “I’m not a prophet or the son of a prophet. Golly, shucks, (shuffle, shuffle) I’m just a simple shepherd.” Which was sort of like Sam Ervin saying, “I’m just a simple country lawyer.” “I take care of the sheep. I dress the sycamore trees. But the Lord took me up by the scruff of the neck and said, ‘Son, you’re gonna be my voice, and tell people what I want you to tell them.’”

Then you know what Amos did? He repeated his message, the one that got him in trouble in the first place, right to the priest’s face. Only this time Amos was more graphic and way more personal.

You say, “Do not prophecy against Israel,
and do not preach against the house of Israel.”
Therefore thus says the Lord,
Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,
And your sons and your daughters shall die by the sword,
And your land shall be parceled out by line;
You yourself shall die in an unclean land,
And Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.

We don’t know what Amaziah said or did in response to Amos’ shockingly blunt pronouncement, because the author doesn’t tell us. My guess is that he was so taken aback he didn’t say anything. He just got on his donkey and hurried back to the king as fast as he could and reported the entire conversation.

It was a classic confrontation between prophet and priest. The prophet and the priest fulfilled two quite different roles in the religious culture of ancient Israel, and their successors fill similarly different roles in our day. A priest went to God on behalf of the people, offering sacrifices for them, saying prayers for them. A prophet went to the people on behalf of God, giving them God's assessments of their behavior, calling for repentance.

Another difference between the prophet and the priest was that the priest was part of the establishment, while the prophet operated on the outside. His calling came directly from God, as did his message. The religious establishment was often his primary target. Because the prophet was outside the system, he couldn't be controlled or manipulated. You couldn't fire him because he didn't work for you. He was beholden to no one, as the old-timers I grew up with would say. Which is what made him such a threat to the powers that be.

Now, let's return to the questions I asked at the beginning of the sermon. Are there prophets around today? How would we know a prophet if we saw one?

It is tempting to say that we don't have prophets today; we have Fox News and MSNBC. We have pundits who dissect political decisions, after the fact, of course, and usually on a partisan, ideological basis. We have prognosticators who base their predictions of the future on societal trends and leading economic indicators (tea leaves and sheep entrails being out of vogue).

It is certainly true that the biblical prophets often were politically astute (see Isaiah's advice to King Ahaz in Isaiah 7:1-17), as the pundits are, but they were never partisan. And though they were concerned about the future, as the prognosticators are, their concern was to trace tomorrow's calamities to today's moral failings. For example, Amos predicted:

The end has come upon my people Israel:
I will never again pass them by.
The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,
says the Lord God.
The dead bodies shall be many,
Cast out in every place. Be silent! (8:3)

What had Israel done to bring about this national catastrophe? They "trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land. . . . (They) buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals." (8:4,6) Their greed is such that they can't wait until Sabbath is over "so we may offer wheat for sale;" they say, "We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances. . . ." (8:5)

Insensitivity to the poor, greed, cheating in business – moral offenses to be sure but what exactly do they have to do with Israel being destroyed by a mighty superpower? A bit simplistic, don't you think? Perhaps. But that was typical of the way the prophets saw things. They believed that what people do grows out of who they are, that decisions and behavior are the products not only of what people believe but also of what they value. For Amos, and for all the prophets, character counted.

Remember: John the Baptist wasn't executed because he criticized Herod's policies; he was executed because he criticized him for marrying someone he had no business marrying. Surely, there were people who said, "Okay, it's tawdry, it's shabby, it's tacky, but as long as it doesn't affect his ability to govern, what's the harm?" John the Baptist couldn't leave it alone because for him character counted. Which probably gives you an idea of where he would come down if he lived in South Carolina today. Or North Carolina. Or New York City. Or wherever public figures have proven unfaithful in their most intimate relationships, especially if their

unfaithfulness was coupled with sheer hypocrisy. I don't think John the Baptist had much of a sense of humor, but if he did I think he would have liked the bumper sticker I saw recently. It said, "All my concubines believe in traditional marriage."

We might be inclined to say that we don't have prophets today; we have pundits and prognosticators instead. But I think the answer is, Yes, there are still prophets around. Well, let me qualify that. There are still people around doing and saying prophetic things. They may not be full-time prophets, but on occasion they are prophetic.

How would we know these people if we saw them? First, like Amos, a prophet in our day is not likely to be institutionally connected. Religiously or politically. There may be exceptions to that, but as a rule I think it is accurate. Everyone has to be fair game to the prophet because the prophet's message is from God not from a political party or a denominational office or even a congregation.

Let me take a moment to talk about the pastor as prophet, since you will soon be in the process of looking for a pastor. The problem for the pastor is that s/he is called to be both prophet and priest. And administrator and counselor and, in my case, designated driver for senior adult day trips. Prophet and priest are very different roles, as we saw earlier. They often conflict with each other. They have to be held in delicate balance. The best advice I received as a young would-be minister was from the pastor of my growing up years, a self-educated former blacksmith who told me, "If you are a good priest to the people, if you take care of their personal and spiritual needs, they will let you be a prophet to them. But if you aren't a good priest, and you try to be a prophet, you'll be looking for a new job."

Second, like all the biblical prophets, a prophet in our day will be keenly sensitive to the needs and hurts of real people. Political strategists may be able to draw up plans for the "greater good" without actually considering what those plans do to ordinary people, but the prophet can't do that. To the prophet there is no greater good than what happens to real people.

Third, like the prophets of Israel, a prophet of today will trace political, social and ethical behavior back to the moral and spiritual substratum that produced them. It will be tempting to disregard the prophet, saying that s/he is simplistic and out of touch with the complexities of contemporary issues. But give the prophet an ear and you may well find out that s/he is on to something.

Fourth, like Jeremiah, who went around Jerusalem telling the people that God willed their destruction even while the city was under siege, a prophet of today will not base his message on polls, what people want to hear. His words will not always bring comfort. But there will be a ring of truth about them, a note that resonates with something deep within us whether we want to admit it or not.

Finally, the message of a prophet today will be consistent with the message of the biblical prophets and, most importantly for us Christians, with the person, example and message of Jesus Christ.

So who are these people? Where will we find them? Anywhere really. Columnists, if they are truly independent, are sometimes prophetic. So are artists, writers, and comedians. The person who devised another bumper sticker I saw last week was being prophetic when s/he wrote: "Four out of five Baptist divorcees wish that homosexuals would stop undermining the sanctity of marriage." Even politicians can be prophetic on occasion, when they can break free of their institutional ties. Anybody can be the prophetic voice of God. There is an obscure verse buried in one of the history books of the Hebrew Bible. It says, "Would that all God's people were prophets." The prophethood of the believer.

Let me conclude with an example of a prophetic utterance from an unlikely source, a homeless man who adopted our church when I was a pastor in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His name was David Young, but on the streets he was called the Tigerman, because there were twenty-one tattoos of tigers on his chest, back and arms, lending the threat of violence to his already fearsome appearance. He was one of many mentally ill people who were released from state hospitals in the latter part of the twentieth century in the hope – the false hope in many cases – that they would be cared for by their local communities. Some of the newly released, like David, ended up on the streets.

One winter day the Tigerman stumbled into my office and slumped in the red vinyl chair opposite my desk and stared at me. Finally, he said, “Last night I couldn’t get into any of the shelters.” (I knew that he had been kicked out of every shelter in Boston for fighting, but I didn’t say anything.) “It was so cold. The snow was coming down and I didn’t have anywhere to go. I went to the Longfellow Bridge and looked down into the Charles. A voice inside was saying, ‘Go ahead. Jump. Get it over with. No more being hungry. No more being cold. No more having no place in the world where you’re supposed to be.’ I was crying and holding on to the rail for dear life. I prayed, ‘Sweet Jesus, help me.’ And it was like the voice inside me went away and I felt calm and I walked off the bridge.”

The Tigerman became silent. Somehow I knew that he had spent the rest of the night walking the streets thinking about what had happened out on the Longfellow Bridge.

Suddenly, he lurched forward, pounded his elbow on my desk, and shouted angrily, “That’s the trouble with Jesus! He always keeps me from going over the rail, but he don’t do nothing about the problems that keep me going back to the bridge.”

“Prophecy,” Abraham Heschel said, “is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony.” Those with ears to hear that voice, let them hear.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.