

## LAND WEIGHTED DOWN

Amos 7:7-17

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*This is what the Lord God showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings). When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, "O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" The Lord relented concerning this; "It shall not be," said the Lord. This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord God was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. Then I said, "O Lord God, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" The Lord relented concerning this; "This also shall not be," said the Lord God. This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."*

*Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' "Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall 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.'"*

### I.

For three Sundays, we have heard stories about the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Elisha.

- We have seen Elijah encounter God in a "still, small voice" rather than through more "normal" appearances of God in earthquake, wind, and fire.<sup>1</sup>
- We have seen Elisha's picking up the mantle of prophecy from Elijah and begin to put his own stamp on that divine office.<sup>2</sup>
- And we have seen Elisha grant permission to a military commander who has converted to worshipping the God of Israel to continue to bow to his former gods when military duty and state protocol require it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 19.

<sup>2</sup> II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14.

<sup>3</sup> II Kings 5:1-19

Encountering God as a *still, small voice*, picking up the *mantle* of responsibility from those who have gone before us, receiving *religious permission* to compromise – these are all themes to which we can relate. The speak to *challenges* we face and *decisions* we make *within* our world, nearly three thousand years removed from the world of the prophets.

But when we turn to some of the Minor Prophets – those whose writings are contained in twelve short books at the end of the Old Testament – our relationship with the prophets undergoes a change.

Rather than cheering the prophets on, as we do Elijah and Elisha, when we encounter figures like Amos, Hosea, and Micah, we soon come to the uncomfortable realization that the *dramatic language* and *performative deeds* of the prophets we are reading are more aimed *at us* rather than *on our behalf*. We are more often *objects* of these prophets' ire than we are *cheerleaders* for their speechmaking.

## II.

What do we know about Amos, our prophet for today?

- Not much. Amos lived in the eighth century BCE. He was a shepherd and keeper of sycamore trees in Judah – the southern and more impoverished part of Israel.
- Amos is poor, rustic, living off the land, uneducated, and though eloquent, likely illiterate.

Amos believes he has been called by God from his work of shepherding in the *Southern* Kingdom – Judah – to being a prophet to the *Northern* Kingdom – Israel – which is a bit more refined and prosperous than the surroundings in which he has spent his entire life.

The bulk of Amos' message to the people of the Northern Kingdom is an *attack* on their prosperity. He attacks the wealthy and privileged *for* their wealth and privilege. And Amos' demeanor and language are as *graphic* as any spoken or tweeted in our political culture today.

- For example: In Chapter 2, after criticizing foreign nations who frequently wage war on Israel, Amos turns his ire on the *people* themselves:
  - “They trample the head of the poor into the earth,” Amos says of the people of Israel.
  - “They push the afflicted out of the way.”
  - “Father and son go into the same girl.”<sup>4</sup>
- In Chapter 3, Amos decries the *multiple* homes in which some of the people of Israel live and what God will do about such homes:
  - “I will tear down their winter houses as well as their summer houses.”
  - “Their houses of ivory shall perish.”
  - “Their many houses shall come to an end.”<sup>5</sup>
- In Chapter 4, Amos describes *women* in Israel whose marriages allow them lives of *luxury* and *outward* ease:

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<sup>4</sup> Amos 2:7.

<sup>5</sup> Amos 3:15

*Hear this word,  
You cows of Bashan [Amos says]  
Who are on Mount Samaria,  
Who oppress the poor,  
Who crush the needy,  
Who say to their husbands,  
“Bring something to drink.”<sup>6</sup>*

- And finally, in our passage, Amos addresses a *priest* in Israel who has told him to go back to Judah and earn his living as a prophet there. Amos say to the priest:

*Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,  
And your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,  
And your land shall be parcelled out by line;  
You yourself shall die in an unclean land,  
And Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.*

In reading these texts earlier this summer to prepare for this series, I was reminded of why I have *avoided* any kind of sustained preaching on the prophets in the forty-plus years I have been preaching. I despise language like this. It is violent. It is demeaning. It is inflammatory. It is misogynistic. I despise it whether it comes from my own mouth, from the mouth of a prophet or preacher, from the mouth of a pundit or politician, from the mouth of a commentator or ordinary citizen. The intensity and cruelty of this language is why I don't often read letters to the editor or listen to call-in radio or television programs. To make it worse, when language as graphic and cruel as this is presented as “the Word of the Lord,” I struggle mightily. I cannot help but hope that the wires got crossed between God's *call* to Amos to *speak* and the *nature* of the *speech* Amos delivered.

### III.

But it is not just the *language* or *rhetorical* style that leads me to struggle with the prophets. When I read this material, I took out my pen and a yellow legal pad and wrote at the top “29 Reasons I don't like preaching the prophets.” Here are about half of them:

- I am a pastor not a prophet. My job is to care for people where they are, not chastise them for not being where I may want them to be, or even where *I* think God wants them to be.
- I am not sure the prophets are always *correct* in their social analysis; and they don't seem to offer any programmatic prescriptions other than “burn the house down.”
- I have *little in common* with them in terms of background, personality, or even ways each of us has come to know God.
- I have seen prophets used *legalistically* by people on the political left and people on the political right, few of whom seem alter their own lifestyles to fit what they are claiming the prophets are calling the rest of us to do.
- I don't like the prophets because I refuse to try to motivate people with *guilt* or *threats of judgment*.
- I don't like the prophets because I believe people can *make up their own mind* and I am not sure the prophets accede that to their hearers.
- I don't like the prophets because I am aware of many other places in scripture which do *not* share their hopelessness and judgmentalism.

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<sup>6</sup> Amos 4:1

- I am much more appreciative of what human beings have *achieved* for good than most prophets seem to be.

In addition:

- Prophets are usually *outsiders* to those to whom they speak; while being and outsider has some advantages – including the ability to see what insiders don’t – outsiders often don’t really know the situation they are addressing.
- Prophets are usually not attached to any kind of *institution* and therefore may lack appreciation for what it means to live in or be responsible for in a family, congregation, business, school, political party.
- Finally, prophets seem to throw around words like “justice” and “peace” without granting that their meanings may *not* be shared or self-evident among the people to whom they are speaking and that such meanings can *vary* greatly across cultures and periods of history.

What the priest says of Amos seems true for many prophets: “The land is not able to *bear* all their words.” Even when many of their words seem *right*, the land can be weighted down by them.

#### IV.

But with all these reservations, the text before us – the text to which I have just said “This is the Word of the Lord” and to which you have responded “Thanks be to God” – is calling for some interpretation. So here goes:

(a)

The Book of Amos has *nine* chapters; thus Chapter 5 is the middle of the book with four chapters preceding it and four following.

Within Chapter Five there are some words of *promise*:

*Seek the Lord and live...*<sup>7</sup>

*The one who made the Pleiades and Orion,  
And turns deep darkness into the morning...  
The Lord is his name...*<sup>8</sup>

*Seek good and not evil,  
That you may live;  
And so the Lord, the God of hosts,  
Will be with you...*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Amos 5:6.

<sup>8</sup> Amos 5:8.

<sup>9</sup> Amos 5:14

*Hate evil and love good,  
And establish justice in the gate;  
It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,  
Will be gracious...*<sup>10</sup>

And famously:

*Let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

When Amos calls for *action*, there is at least an *implied promise* that such action is *do-able*, and that life under God will be better because of it. “*Seek the Lord and live...*”

(b)

In addition, when we move to Chapter 9, the *closing* chapter of the book, we hear words of promise from God:

*... I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob...<sup>11</sup>  
I will...shake the house of Israel among all the nations  
As one shakes with a sieve,  
But no pebble shall fall to the ground.<sup>12</sup>*

*...I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen,  
And repair its breaches,  
And raise up its ruins,  
And rebuild it as in the days of old...<sup>13</sup>  
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,  
And they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;  
They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
And they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.<sup>14</sup>*

Despite the intensity of the language of judgment throughout the book of Amos, in the middle of the book, Chapter Five, and at its end, Chapter Nine, God promises *presence*, *protection*, *posterity* and *purpose*. Amos ends with a *future* to be had and a *responsibility* to live into.

(c)

Finally, at almost the *exact middle* of the book, in Chapter Five, verse 13, the Lord says through Amos:

*...the prudent (or wise)<sup>15</sup> will keep silent in such a time;  
for it is an evil time.*

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<sup>10</sup> Amos 5:15.

<sup>11</sup> Amos 9:8.

<sup>12</sup> Amos 9:9.

<sup>13</sup> Amos 9:11.

<sup>14</sup><sup>14</sup> Amos 9:14.

<sup>15</sup> The prudent (Maskil) is often translated “wise” and comes from wisdom literature (Proverbs 10:5, 19; 17:2; 21:11).

I know that the message of *prudence, wisdom, thoughtfulness, discernment, holding our tongue, remaining silent* can seem utterly *out of place* and *counterproductive* in such a time as ours, and can therefore be *offensive*. When there is so much anger and so much fear within so many different sectors of our society, being prudent, being silent, risks being *nothing*. There are times in which being “prudent” in the face of evil is the *riskiest* way to be.

But prudence can also be a *faithful* choice, sometimes, the *most* faithful.

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I am fairly – though not totally – convinced that the level of noise we are experiencing across our world today is both a *response* to the evil times in which we live and in some ways a *contributor* to it. Waiting to speak until we have something about which we have been thoughtful, prayerful, consultative, and knowledgeable to say can be a faithful choice, perhaps the most faithful, in times which are evil.

My own conclusion is that the multiple witness within the Book of Amos – prophetic pronouncement and prudent reserve – reveals that both prophet and prudent need one another. In both our world and our faith, the prophet needs to listen to the prudent and the prudent needs to listen to the prophet. The prophet often needs the prudent in order to *learn* how be heard. The prudent often needs the prophet in order to *have something to say*.

Perhaps it is an *intentional, structured blessing* of the Book of Amos that the prophet gets more *ink* but the prudent gets the *verse at the center* and the *closing chapter*. Perhaps the most important message with which both Amos the Prophet and the book which bears his name leave us is that we need both the prophet and the prudent.

Amen.

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