

July 30, 2017

Lesson 9: Amos's Call

Scripture: Amos 7: 10-17

Context:

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”¹ We've heard those words immortalized by MLK as he preached and made speeches during the Civil Rights movement to end segregation in the United States. The phrase is biblical; the prophet Amos was the first to proclaim that God's will would be done.

Amos is known as one of the minor prophets. But do not let the term “minor” fool you. Amos was well known for his sagacity and boldness in the face of corruption. His words packed a punch. The book of Amos begins his career that starts in the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel who died in 747 BCE and Uzziah of Judah who relinquished his throne in 759 because of illness.² In the first chapter we read of Amos' preaching taking place “two years before the earthquake,”³ in which we have physical evidence at archaeological digs in Hazor and Samaria.⁴ Thus most scholars put his prophet career around 750 and lasting about a decade.⁵

Most of the biographical information about Amos comes from the book. He was born in Tekoa, in Judah, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem.⁶ Most of his preaching was directed against the northern kingdom, revealing his own placement as a part of the southern kingdom.⁷ What sets Amos apart from the other prophets is that he did not come from a “school of prophets.” Ezekiel was a priest from the Temple and Isaiah was probably a prophet in the royal court. Amos however, was a sheep and castle herder.⁸ While some might interpret this as a poor farmer, it more than likely meant he was more of an overseer with a large number of sheep.⁹

Like most other prophets, Amos had words for everyone. He starts by condemning both Israel and the nations of Israel for breaking the covenant (1:3-2:16). This referred to their behavior to one another and towards Yahweh (God). Following the prophetic word that God will punish them, Amos moves onto individual sins that Israel has committed (Amos 3:3-8).

Amos does not mince words. He especially focuses on how the Israelites have broken their covenant by not correctly worshipping God and justly treating their neighbors. He especially criticizes the people for trampling the poor and how they are

¹ Amos 5: 24, NRSV.

² Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 313.

³ Amos 1:1.

⁴ Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 313.

⁵ Ibid.,313.

⁶ Ibid, 313.

⁷ Ibid., 313.

⁸ Amos 1:1, 7:14-15, NRSV.

⁹ Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 313.

deprived of justice.¹⁰ What Amos is most famous for though in these passages is his attack of the elite in the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem, who collected their at the expense of others. In his words against them he includes a jab to the women of Samaria as he calls them “fat cows, like those raised in Bashan,” who will be punished by being slaughtered.¹¹

We hear even in the passage today that Amos does not care if royalty commands him to be silent as he tells the royal priest Amaziah of Israel’s King Jeroboam that he will say what needs to be said and that he does not care who lives in Bethel. Even if it is the kings’ royal holy place, Amos will not stop. He will say what the Lord has put on his heart.

Application:

Amos is one of those prophets that you would love to be on their good side, but hate to be on their bad side. His words are foreboding and he does not hold back when it comes to telling people what he thinks and what God has put on his heart to say or do. You would probably know where you stand with Amos.

The words of Amos make it very clear though that God does care about how we order our relationships with God and one another. Even as a prosperous farmer, Amos can see when certain systems benefit certain people and even how religious institutions can support the status quo just as we see in his conversation with the priest of Bethel.

As I think about the direction of this country and debates on issues such as healthcare and rights for different groups of people, I cannot help but think about who the Amos’s of our day may be. They do not just come from pulpits or even from those who sit in places like Congress. Like Amos, they are everyday workers who see that there is something fundamentally wrong with some of the decisions that affect millions of people. And every person has a voice.

Just the other day, I heard a politician dismiss an entire group of people. My immediate reaction was anger. I thought of all the people I know who would be adversely affected by his words and actions if he sought to do what he proposed. How could anyone say such words without realizing the repercussions of their particular belief? But I realized that this person is still my brother in Christ. We both believe in Jesus and both have made a commitment to serve him as our Lord. I am called to love him and he is called to love me. God is still bigger than both of us.

But that does not mean I cannot ask him questions and challenge him. And the same goes for others who hear words that they know are not in line with loving God and loving our neighbor. I think the prophet Amos reminds us that sometimes we need to step up and call for accountability. We have all had our Amos’s who can have those direct conversations with us and do it in a language we understand. When it comes from love and care, it is obvious. When it comes from ambitious or manipulative purposes, it is obvious. So let us remember that as servants of Jesus, we are to look out for all people: the underserved, the marginalized, the disadvantaged, and even those who are different from us. As Jesus said in Matt. 25:40 “Just as you have done to one of these who is the least of my family, you have done it to me.”¹² Those are words to live by and they are

¹⁰ Amos 2:6; 2:7; 4:1; 5:11; 5:12; 8:4; 8:6.

¹¹ Amos 4: 1-2.

¹² Matt. 25: 40.

ones that we are called to remember as followers of Jesus Christ.

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