

“Not So Minor Prophets: 1) Amos”

a sermon by

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Text: “And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, 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.’” (Amos 7:12-13)

In the early 1970’s the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, faced a somewhat unusual problem. He attended worship from time to time at various churches in and around Washington, D.C. But on several occasions he ran into very embarrassing situations. It was during the Viet Nam War, and in many places the war was not popular. On several occasions the President attended a worship service only to have presented to him a sermon by a minister that criticized the Viet Nam War.

The President became so agitated that he decided to offer an alternative approach to worship. Instead of attending worship in the churches in Washington he decided to sponsor his own worship service in the East Room of the White House. His staff carefully invited certain ministers to preach at the White House, choosing those whom they were sure would not bring up the subject of Viet Nam.

President Nixon’s decision to do this caused both praise and criticism. One of the critics was Reinhold Niebuhr, who by then had suffered a stroke and was near death. But he rallied enough to criticize the President for wanting to choose only those preachers who agreed with his politics. Niebuhr argued that the President’s attempt to control those who would lead worship was a serious attack on the prophetic nature of the Christian faith.

I.

Throughout the Old Testament there is a certain tension between the charismatic and institutional elements of Israel’s religious life.

In the years before Israel had kings, there were certain charismatic figures called “judges” who God would raise up from time to time to resolve certain crises. Samson was one of these. He was a man of great strength whom God called upon to deal with the great Philistine crisis.

There were other judges as well, with names like Deborah, Gideon and Jephthah. These were charismatic and gifted figures who led Israel in battle against their enemies. When the crisis was over, these individuals returned to their normal life.

But when Israel began to be ruled by kings, all of this changed. The kings had royal power and the day of the “judges” was over.

But the charismatic office of the judge, who was given authority and power by God, did not end. Concurrent with the rise of kingship was the rise of the classical prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a host of others. The prophet took his authority as a messenger or spokesman for God. Because the prophet was viewed as a spokesman for God, not even a king would dare to harm a prophet.

The prophet was a powerful figure, who could stand before the king himself. The Book of II Samuel tells us of a prophet named Nathan, who appeared before King David after the king’s adulterous affair with Bathsheba and confronted him with his sin.

The Scripture that I read from the book of Amos is another example of the conflict between king and prophet.

The prophet Amos was one of the so-called Minor Prophets. He prophesied in the time of the 8th Century B.C. By this time the kingdom of Israel had split into a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The capital of the kingdom in the South (Judah) was Jerusalem. The King in the north, Jeroboam, had built his own sanctuaries in Bethel and Ai.

The priest who was in charge of the temple of Bethel was Amaziah. He had been appointed by the King and was answerable to the king. Therefore, when Amos showed up at the temple in Bethel and began to preach the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, Amaziah was terribly upset. He immediately informed the king that Amos was stirring up trouble and that the land would not be able to contain the words of Amos.

Then Amaziah confronted Amos, telling him to return to his native land of Judah and not to prophesy at the temple at Bethel, because it was the sanctuary of the king.

Amos replied by saying that he was “neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet.” He was by trade a rancher and a dresser of sycamore trees.

Then Amos delivered one of the most stunning and stirring prophecies in the Old Testament against an individual. Amaziah’s wife would become a prostitute, his children would be killed by an invading army, Amaziah would be carried away to an unclean land, and the kingdom of Israel would be taken into exile.

In 721 B.C. the Assyrian army swept into Northern Israel and every word that Amos had spoken came true.

II.

Amos, of course, is regarded as one of the so-called Minor Prophets. The corpus of the book that bears his name contains only nine chapters, but there are few books in the entire Bible that pack the punch that the Book of Amos delivers.

There are a number of themes that are present in the prophecy of Amos, but there is perhaps none more critical than Amos' cry for "justice and righteousness."

For Amos, religion was not just worship and ceremony. In fact, in one of his speeches he denounces the worship of Israel when he quotes God as saying,

"I hate, I despise your festivals,
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." (Amos 5:21)

The attack on religion in Amos is a theme that one finds throughout the prophetic literature. But it is not just worship that is attacked. It is worship that is hollow, self-centered, and void of any ethical dimension.

Amos lived in the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel. It was a prosperous time for the nation and the chasm between wealth and poverty was great. In Chapters 1 and 2 of this book Amos delivers judgment against all of the neighbors of Israel: the Edomites, Syrians, Ammonites, Moabites, etc. But he finishes this attack against his own people, accusing them of "trampling the poor into the dust of the earth and pushing the afflicted out of the way." (Amos 2:4-8)

In one of the most famous passages of this book, Amos denounces the false hope of the people of his day and reminds them of the call of God: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

In his famous speech "I have a Dream," Martin Luther King, Jr. recalled the words of the prophet Amos as he spoke before the tens of thousands of people who had gathered there at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Like Amos, Dr. King called for justice in the area of civil rights and like Amos, called a people to repent.

III.

The Book of Amos functions in another important way in the life of the church. It is a reminder to all of us that there is a prophetic element in our faith that calls us to repent of our sin and to turn to God in ways that are not always comfortable to us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was acutely aware of what he called "cheap grace" in the church. For Bonhoeffer "cheap grace" is forgiveness without repentance, absolution without confession, grace without discipleship, and grace without the cross.

It is very easy for the church to live with cheap grace. Often we are content merely to go through the motions of religion. We come to church for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. We come for the festival days of Christmas and Easter. Religion very easily becomes a religion of comfort. We seek forgiveness, assurance, and affirmation.

Prophets like Amos, however, remind us that there is another element of our faith, namely the Christian life. As Christians we do not simply believe in Jesus, we are called to follow Jesus.

The prophetic element of Christianity is an essential element to our faith, but it is one that is easily endangered, particular in a time in which preachers preach the gospel of wealth and others see religion as simply a matter of forgiveness and entertainment.

In our worship we should always remember that it is God to whom we are finally accountable, and it is God who holds before us the command to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:6)

Harry Emerson Fosdick, who for many years was the preacher at the Riverside Church in New York City, always said that before he went into the pulpit each Sunday he recalled the words of Hugh Latimer, who was the preacher of the Royal Chapel in England. Each Sunday Latimer recalled that as he was headed to the Royal Chapel, he heard a voice within say: “Latimer, Latimer, be careful what you preach today because you are to preach before the King of England.” Then, he would hear another voice that said, “Latimer, Latimer be careful what you preach today, since you are going to preach before the King of Kings.”

May God grant to each of us the power not only to be comforted by the word of God but to be convicted by it as well.

Amen.