

Sermon: The Reluctant Prophet

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Texts: Amos 7:10-16 a, 5:21-24, Luke 4 (excerpts)

A friend of mine, a low-income Black man, a sort of inner-city prophet, called me on the telephone on New Year's Day a few years ago. He asked me how I was. I told him. And then he said something like this, "I heard so-and-so many children died this week in famines, street fights and wars." And then he chuckled very ironically, and he said, "That is, they died...if they are real. Do you think they are real?" And he chuckled again, then he said good-bye.

It was a short, strange, disturbing, horrifying phone call, one that I would rather not have listened to, but I am not sure I should expect anything different from what I take to be my friend's prophetic voice. He calls me every now and then just to remind me of the impoverished world he knows is real, and which he fears I will forget while I live in relative ease. After his phone call, restless and uneasy, I read the Bible a little, thought a little, and prayed a little.

50 years ago, the poorest households in the world had proportionately something like \$3 for every \$100 belonging to the wealthiest homes. Pretty miserable. Today, after 50 years of Green Revolution, technological fixes, dam-building, development projects, the internet, globalization, NAFTA and World Bank loans, the same poorest 20% of the world's households have proportionately a little better than 50 cents for every \$100 belonging to the wealthiest homes, proportionately a sixth of what they had when the so-called

improvements began. The gap has only widened despite every technique tried so far. Eight million of our human sisters and brothers die every year from hunger-related causes. That is one death every four seconds. About three-fourths of those deaths are children under five years of age.

So, I just end up wondering if the 3.6 billion poor of the earth, or the one- billion chronically underfed people of the earth think of me--a middle-class, beef-fed, American Christian living in one of those "wealthiest" homes, as all of you do as well-- as a person of compassion, fairness and justice, as someone who knows that their poverty and needs are as real as those of my own wife, children, neighbors and friends? Or, is it possible they think of me as an over-consumer with serious soul-issues about sharing possessions?

I was disturbed by my friend's call, yet as the theologian Abraham Heschel says, "The prophets, endowed with a mission, and the power of a word not their own, are the most disturbing persons who have ever lived." They are to us-- poets and crackpots, preachers and ravers, moralists and street performers, all rolled into one.

I've titled this particular sermon, "Why Is a Prophet Reluctant to Speak?", and in a certain sense, it might as well be the title of all the prophets of ancient Israel, as well as those in our contemporary times, for they are people who often very reluctantly accept the call from God to "see" things in the way God sees them, and to speak God's truth

into a world that will only resist, rebuke and reject what they say.

Amos reluctantly saw five visions of what have been called “catastrophes of nature and history” facing Israel, the northern kingdom in the 8th century BC: Three were natural disasters--a plague of locusts, a burning drought, an earthquake—all emblemizing the judgment of God expressed through natural physical disorders upon a nation that was not in good spiritual order. Two of the visions are judgments based on common human experience: a plumb-line symbolizing standards of justice and rectitude which the metaphorical walls of Israel’s justice cannot meet, and a basket of overripe, rotten fruit, symbolizing an “overripe” and “rotten” society.

He probably did not want to see any of those visions. He was, after all, a quiet shepherd and a fig-tree farmer from Judah; he wasn’t even a citizen of the nations he was called to warn. You tell me: would you want to be called to warn the nations about their lack of kindred feeling for one another, their selfishness, violence and brutality? I would not! Who would appreciate it? Who would want to hear it today if a prophet said, woe to Iraq, but not only Iraq...and woe to Iran, but not only Iran...and woe to North Korea...and woe to Afghanistan...and woe to Germany...and woe to India for neglect of human rights, and woe to Pakistan for exporting terrorism, and woe to Syria to brutal dictatorship, and woe to Mexico for drug violence, but not only these! And Woe to the United States...For all the nations will reap

what they have sown. No wonder Amos was a reluctant seer! Who wants to see what no one else *can* see, and to speak what no one else wishes to hear?

Who wants to cry out and to warn, “Woe to those who are at ease in Zion (while the poor ones suffer)...This reveling shall pass away...” (6:1, 7). God says to people of faith, and to many nations, “Ye have not returned to me....Prepare to meet thy God.”

Amos goes to the Northern Kingdom; he blisters the self-concerned, self-satisfied, “rotten” attitudes of the nations with the words he hears from God. He warns them of God’s unwillingness to go on overlooking and excusing their faults, or to continue pretending their religiosity should be taken seriously when they lacked compassion.

*I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people...
I will never again pass them by. ...*

*(See this?) A basket of summer fruit....
The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by....*

*Thus says the Lord...
I hate, I despise your feasts,
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies (for
worship)
(your sacrifices and your songs)...*

But let justice roll down like waters

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Then Amos assaults and accuses that nation of a “famine,” a famine of compassion and of true responsiveness to the Lord:

*They sell the righteous for silver
And the needy for a pair of shoes—
They that trample the head of the poor into the dust of
the earth,
And turn aside from the way of the afflicted.*

And what did it get Amos—all of this seeing as God sees and speaking as God would speak? He was told in no uncertain terms by Amaziah, a leading religious leader, that he was to hush up, and go preach anywhere else. Other prophetic figures, well-known to us in both Scripture and in our own times, have suffered the same difficulties. Think of Jeremiah, or of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Stanley Hauerwas, perhaps the most controversial Christian ethicist in America today, occasionally tells his friends and enemies in his best Ross Perot-like, whiney Texas screech, “Do you think I *want* this task? Do you think I *asked* God to lay this on me?” Every word he utters for God comes at personal cost.

In his now 40-year old study of the prophets, Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish theologian once wrote, “The prophet’s word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven”, and responds with a message that is meant to be “a ceaseless shattering of indifference....(addressed to a world that the

prophet sees as) terrifyingly absurd...defiant of its Maker, deaf to meaning, tottering on the brink of disaster, with the voice of God imploring (them) to turn to Him....”

What is Amos’ message? It comes to this: *No people can long prosper who substitute ritual for devotion, prosperity for integrity, legalese for justice, or where unlimited wealth for a few comes at the price of inescapable poverty for most.* When there is no kindred loyalty among nations and no pity among human beings, then certainly God’s angry voice will be heard like the roar of a lion—through the events of nature and history. Amos offers a bare glimpse of possibility to those who would turn again to God. Amos 5:15: “Seek the Lord and live....*It may be* that the Lord will be gracious to the remnant...” *It may be...*

Martin Buber, another Jewish theologian, says in his book, *The Prophetic Faith*, “The true prophet does not announce an immutable decree (or do fortune-telling or speculative, apocalyptic timelines, I hasten to add). The true prophet speaks into the power of decision lying in the moment, and in such a way that (the) message of disaster just touches this power (of decision)” (103ff). In other words, there is a choice every moment when we sort of get a phone call from God, from the prophet who asks us whether we recognize what is real in the world’s sufferings, and whether we will “seek the Lord and live”, as Amos says, by doing the right thing.