

2026-04-19 Amos: The Social Justice Prophet

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Amos was not wealthy nor was he well-known. When he began prophesying he didn't have either face or name recognition, so he wasn't really a good "candidate" or "poster child" for any causes. Amos was a herdsman and a pruner of trees. A farmer, basically. He was a peasant who lived close to the earth and understood that things were not as they should be. Even in the 8th century B.C.E. things were not as they were supposed to be. Amos didn't ask to be a prophet – no one really WANTS to be a prophet; being a prophet means telling people things they don't really want to hear! If you're known as a prophet you often have a target on your back, people spying on you, trying to shut you down and shut you up, wealthy and powerful people wanting you gone. Pastor Chris said last week that "Prophets were hated. Their job was to call into question the 'order of things'". The prophets were "licensed critics of their own people".

When I was a student at AMBS (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) in Elkhart, IN I was required (along with all the other graduating students) to write a final "reflection" paper on my seminary experience. I titled it "Pastor and Prophet: How is one person supposed to be both?" It was clear to me then that being pastoral and being prophetic were somehow both in the job description and both would be expected of me. But they seem like two polar opposite jobs that require very different skill sets and character traits. The pastor is, well, pastoral – gentle, compassionate, comforting, shepherding, loving, contemplative... the prophet might be characterized as bold, even strident sometimes, confronting, maybe angry or judgmental, radical, abrasive or blunt. If those are shared expectations of both pastor and prophet, it can feel a bit soul-splitting to try to pastor the same people you're being prophetic to!

But one really beautiful and helpful thing I've gleaned from Rohr's book is the idea that the prophets (like all of us) had to evolve in their understanding of God. They might have started out angry and self-righteous, strident and bitter in their truth-telling, but as they matured they learned to embrace the heart and perspective of God – they gain humility, mercy and love. And out of this perspective the Creator – and the prophet, is moved to deep grief and tears. We have a God who weeps for us and with us. Rohr writes that "Prophets and mystics recognize what most of us do not – that all things *have* tears and all things *deserve* tears.... grief and sadness are doorways to understanding life. Tears come from both awe and empathy and they generate awe and empathy in us... the Hebrew prophets came to see this profound connection between anger and sadness. It was what converted them to a level of truth-telling that is deep and forever true... they first needed to get angry at injustices, oppression, and war. Anger can be deserved and even virtuous, when it motivates us to begin seeking a necessary change...but if we stay with our rage and resentment too long, we will righteously and unthinkingly pass on the hurt in ever new directions, and we will injure our own souls in ways we don't even recognize." (pgs. 4-5) So, it's been a relief to me to read this book and begin to find words for that process and realize that the righteous anger of my youth (that still makes appearances) is "deserved and even virtuous" when it motivates me to seek change. But the overwhelming urge that I feel more often, (and maybe that you feel too) the urge to weep, is also deserved and virtuous. And in fact, Rohr writes that the tears are actually moving us toward the heart of God. It was tears that moved the O.T. prophets.

Now... back to Amos. As I said, already back in the 8th century B.C.E., he knew that things were not as they were supposed to be. And God called him to talk about it and call the people out. Now remember, these words are thousands of years old; listen carefully to compare which of Amos' prophetic words might not be applicable today. Rohr writes about 2 main ideas in Amos' prophecy.

First, he talked about what Rohr calls Amos' "bias toward the bottom". This is the notion that God has a bias toward the people who are at the bottom of the social ladder. God demands justice and care for the alien and the widow, for children and those who are ill – those who are the most vulnerable in any society. Amos prophesied "at the height of Israel's greatest territorial expansion and prosperity. Many Israelites interpreted their success as a sign of God's special favor. But Amos saw their society for what it was. He preached against the people's transgressions, (which he named as) their complacency, their reliance on military might, their injustices in social dealing, their immorality, and their shallow, showy piety. He was particularly harsh on those who squeezed lives of luxury out of an unjust system." Here's what he had to say to them... "Listen to this word, you cows of Bashan... oppressing the needy, crushing the poor, saying to your husbands, 'Bring us something to drink.'" Amos 4:1 He's describing those who build their opulence on the backs of the poor.

Richard Rohr reflects that for the most part Amos' words have been ignored. The bias, in our societies and in our churches, has invariably been *from* the top and *toward* the top. He says, "We liked kings and bishops much more than we even noticed layfolk, women, and herdsmen," He goes on, "Culture eats religion for lunch... our beliefs are determined much more by our dominant ways of life and our surrounding cultural influences than by what we say we believe religiously." Do you think that's true? (Repeat, our beliefs are determined...) pg. 18-20

"When we lose the bias toward the bottom", Rohr writes, "it's often because we never got on the biblical trajectory to begin with. We are far more (like the powerful and colonizing) Egyptians and Babylonians, Romans and Greeks, than (we are like the) enslaved Hebrews seeking liberation."

Rohr also makes the point that one's perspective matters because the perspective you start from determines the kinds questions you ask or don't ask about your own culture and its biases. "Truth", he writes, "...always comes wrapped in the society and historical moment that produced it." Our perspectives are often interpreted "in a vacuum or through our own, limited lens that can lead to misunderstandings, or worse. This was how we arrived, sometimes for a span of centuries, at self-interested interpretations that allowed us to justify prejudice, slavery, exorbitant wealth, and whatever else we preferred."

A perfect example of the importance of perspective is what space travelers call the "Overview Effect". This is "a term coined by science author and philosopher Frank White in 1987. It refers to a shift in perspective that occurs when humans are given the chance to view Earth in the context of its cosmic backdrop – driving home how perfectly suited the planet is for our habitation and how unforgiving the great beyond appears." Christina Koch, one of the crew members of the Artemis II experienced this "Overview Effect" and she commented on it.

She said, “What you realize is every single person that you know is sustained” by the thin band of atmosphere, which is visible in its entirety from space... “Everything else outside of it is completely inhospitable. You don’t see borders, you don’t see religious lines, you don’t see political boundaries. All you see is Earth and you see that we are way more alike than we are different.” This sensation has been reported by astronauts through generations. Talk about perspective! Thanks to John Fast for providing me the article about this “Overview Effect”. (by Jackie Wattles)

Richard Rohr makes the point that “Amos, like other prophets, doesn’t stay forever angry or threatening.” Instead, his anger is transformed and becomes “generative, creative energy.” So that after Chapter 4 we find him moving toward “a plaintive sadness” and disappointment. This also aligns with the astronauts’ experience of the “Overview Effect”. You may remember that the Star Trek actor William Shatner took a brief trip into space in 2021 and had a “visceral reaction to seeing the small blue blanket of air from the vantage point of space.” He said, “I thought about how we’re killing everything. I felt this overwhelming sadness for the Earth.”

So, the first idea that we can take from Amos is the importance of having a bias toward the bottom of society and focusing our lives and our purpose on establishing societies that make it possible for those folks to thrive. We have to change our perspective in order to do that.

The second important lesson from the prophet Amos is that his prophecy is aimed at the collective rather than at individuals. He does single out the temple priest Amaziah as well as the king Jeroboam – but those two individuals represent two of the most elite groups of the day – the priests and the rulers and Amos was implicating them as part of the corrupt power system. Amos’ judgments are clearly directed at the group, the culture, the society as a whole. He knew that cultures and systems are what create the large scale evils that threaten us – poverty, war, ecological devastation. Religion, Amos said, has to address this collective evil rather than being a part of it.

Rohr points out that Amos not only addresses the people of Judah and Israel, but his prophecies extend to neighboring nations as well! “Too often,” Rohr writes, “sins we condemn in the individual are admired, or at least given a cultural pass at the corporate level.” He lists some of these contradictions:

- Killing is wrong, but war is acceptable and even glorified.
- Greed is wrong, but luxury and capitalism are ideals to pursue.
- Pride is bad, but nationalism and patriotism are admirable.
- Lust is wrong, but flirting and seduction are attractive.
- Envy is capital sin, but advertising is our way of life.
- Anger at our neighbor is wrong, but angry people often get their way.
- Murder is wrong, but easy access to guns is a right.

Here is where the two lessons from Amos can intersect.

The perspective from the bottom can help us to curb this human tendency to condemn an individual sin but to accept or even admire the same sin when it’s committed on the cultural level. For instance, to critique capitalism in most American pulpits is risky. But from the

perspective of the poor, they hear and appreciate this critique because they are at the receiving end of capitalism's damages.

The church has tried for centuries to save individuals while all along ignoring the corrupt systems in which those individuals live. The prophets knew that it is social sin that destroys civilization and humanity. Just look at the corporate sin in our time... global warming, war, idealizing immense wealth, the growing income inequality, any of the isms – racism, sexism, classism, a denial of common truths and on and on. The prophets generally attacked cultural assumptions more than the people caught up in them.

But even the concept of “social justice” has been misunderstood, Rohr points out. In places where most people live in relative comfort, we've been co-opted with just enough comfort that we don't feel the pinch that most of the developing world feels. It's a bit of a manipulative head-game to keep people just close enough to “success” that they spend their whole lives striving for it, worshipping it.

The Hebrew prophets didn't find their truth in books or laws, but in questions of love, in how much care and justice was offered for common people. The kings and religious leaders were measured – with a plumb line – in terms of how well they cared for their people. Rohr wonders if maybe that's why most Christians know almost nothing about the book of Amos. Perhaps his message is culturally incompatible with our modern, individualistic values? We think justice happens when we send a bad guy go to jail. But we don't dare to convict the whole system of massive injustice and deceit that often puts that guy there.

Taking responsibility for the common good is the highest call for the prophets, giving vision and encouragement to society at large – not doling out guilt and shame on individuals. Shaming individual people has been a huge failure for the church because it's not founded on love, on an appreciation of goodness, truth or beauty. Shame is built on negativity.

In the end, Amos offers a positive vision. He ends his book with the rewards and rejoicing that are based in this earth and this world. In chapter 9 we read:

Harvest will follow directly after plowing,
the treading of grapes immediately after sowing,
when the mountains will run with new wine and the hills will flow with it.
I mean to restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
they will rebuild their ruined cities and live in them,
plant vineyards and drink their wine, dig gardens and eat their produce.
I will plant them in their own country, never to be rooted up again,
out of the land I have given them.

Now these promises, of course, are given to all peoples and cultures who trust in God and care for each other and for the earth. Israel was to have been the model, the peoples who led others in showing the ways of God. This is NOT referring to the modern-day nation of Israel.

There is earth-based positivity, human joy, and the consciousness of God's love in these verses. When we “let justice flow like water and integrity like an unfailing stream” there's peace and

well-being for all people. “Radical unity with God and neighbor is the only way any of us truly heals or improves”, writes Rohr.

In the 8th century, B.C.E., Amos introduced a revolution in humans’ understanding of how divine love operates among us. It’s not about retribution or punishment. It’s about a re-ordering, about humanity seeking to find the level, the balance for all people and creation to work together. Amos is pointing to God’s extravagant love, God’s idea to love creation into loving God back. This notion sets the pattern for all the prophets to follow. Amos offers a strong, clear movement *away* from retribution and punishment *towards* what will become a new covenant of restorative justice that we’ll see in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and, of course, most fully in the life of Jesus. ***This*** path is available for humanity to choose and it changes everything. May we be wise enough, humble enough, may there be tears enough to usher in the changes. Thanks be to God!

It seemed like the choir anthem would be a really wonderful song of sending for us this morning, and that spoken words or even piano or organ music after the song might really detract from the beauty and message of the anthem, so I invite the choir to come on up now and then I’ll offer the benediction and the choir will sing us out this morning.

Benediction – Go from this place steeped in the wisdom of Amos. May our hearts be softened to change our perspective. May our minds be opened to consider how to infuse God’s love for all of creation and God’s longing for justice into every aspect of who we are as humanity, as God’s beloved creation. Go from this place filled with God’s creative joy and peace.