

Angry Amos: Prophet of the Poor

Last week Linda helpfully located the prophet Miriam's ministry within the larger history of Israel and today I want to do the same by talking a bit about the Prophet Amos' place in the long and sprawling history of the people of God in the Bible. As you will find out during this worship series, we will be doing a bit of "jumping around" historically, sometimes moving backward and forward in time as we look at different Prophetic characters from scripture. Initially we had planned for a bit more of a chronologically ordered series, but some of our guest speakers who committed to preaching on certain prophets could only come on specific dates and so we ended up moving things around a bit.

All that to say that Amos' story is quite removed from the prophet Miriam (1400-1300 BCE) who we looked at last week. By the time we move from Miriam to Amos (775 BCE roughly when he's prophesying), over 600 years has passed, and during that time the people of Israel have made it through the desert, settled in Canaan, gone through the throes of many forms of disparate and often troubled leadership only to enter a period of national establishment with a united Monarchy under Kings Saul, David, and Solomon. Eventually that united monarchy would fall, and the nation of Israel would be fractured into Northern and Southern kingdoms, each with their differing Kings and centers of national life and worship. This was part of the basic geo-political context of Israel in the time Amos arose as a prophet.

The written account of the prophet Amos has been handed down to us in a collection of prophetic books in the Old Testament often referred to as "The Book of Twelve" or sometimes "the minor prophets." Before turning to Amos, it is worthwhile to say a few things about this

collection. The book of the twelve appear, for Christians, towards the end of the Old Testament¹ and include prophetic texts from: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi [say that 5 times fast!]. While each of these books have their own audience and unique messages, they were all nonetheless written during the tumultuous period of Israel's national history from about the eighth to the sixth century BCE, when the northern and southern kingdoms came under increasing internal and external tensions and pressures. Internally, the kingdoms were led often by corrupt kings and a social fabric of daily life and worship that had failed to prioritize justice and righteousness. Externally, the kingdoms were constantly under threat from the ever-encroaching surrounding nations—initially Assyria and later Babylon—and indeed these surrounding nations would eventually be the cause of the fall of both kingdoms. Often the twelve prophets saw a direct link between Israel's internal problems and their external problems. For many of them, the prophetic foretelling of Israel's national destruction was directly linked to their internal corruption and lack of justice and righteousness. For these prophets, Israel's almost guaranteed fall would be God's judgment and justice enacted on them for their failure to do what is right.

Given that there are a great number of similarities and thematic resonances within the message of the twelve prophets, most scholars have come to the conclusion that they were eventually brought together sometime after Israel's return from exile in Babylon with the intention that they be read as a collection or series to provide guidance in a new age of national

¹ For Jews, the book at the end of the *Tanakh* is Chronicles. The ordering of OT books shows some of the distinctive theological implications of the ordering of the Jewish and Christian canons. For Christians, the OT ends with the prophetic book of Malachi that looks towards the coming of a new "Elijah" who Christians have associated with John the Baptist as the forerunner to the Messiah. For Jews, the canon ends with the Persian King Cyrus calling the people of Israel to go up to Jerusalem to rebuild, a trajectory of new hope for the nation apart from any coming Messianic figure – although intriguingly, Cyrus himself was named as God's anointed, a "Messiah," in Isaiah 45:1.

life. In the book of Sirach, which is a text written 150-200 years before Jesus' birth and is included in Catholic and Orthodox bibles, there is a reference to the collection of the twelve prophets which reads: "May the bones of the Twelve Prophets send forth new life from where they lie, for they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope." (Sirach 49:10) I confess that the more I read some of these prophets, including Amos, the more that I wonder about Sirach's claim that the twelve prophets "send forth new life" and "deliver" God's people with "confident hope." It is a striking claim to make, given just how much these prophets trade in grim, violent images of God's judgment and the destruction awaiting the people who turn from God's law. While it is true that the prophets speak many lovely and inspiring words of hope and restoration as well, I was struck this week just how frequently they sound not hopeful but downright angry – angry as they act as messengers of what seems to be an angry God, the God who is referred to in several of these prophets, including Amos, as a roaring lion.² Listen to this line about God's anger, for example, from the prophet Nahum³:

3 The LORD is slow to anger *but* great in power, and the LORD will *by no means* clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet....⁵ The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who live in it. 6 Who can stand before his indignation? *Who can endure the heat of his anger?* His wrath is poured out like fire, and by him the rocks are broken in pieces. (Nahum 1:3-6)

Referring to our hymn of preparation, I certainly find myself asking in the face of the prophetic depiction of divine anger: "can it be that *anger* can bring new life?"

I suspect many of us will want to be cautious about a supposedly life-giving role for anger, whether the anger is expressed by God or us, and I think there is good reason for us to be cautious. Anger can, and perhaps more often than not does, do exactly the opposite from bringing

² Hosea, Amos, and Nahum all employ this image of God as a roaring or devouring lion.

³ Nahum's sights were set on Assyria especially, but his depiction of an angry God surely applies to Israel as well.

new life. Often anger breeds destruction, resentment, and division, not new life, and when we project such anger onto God, I fear how such an understanding of God might impact our own faith and life. Jesus, we might recall, warned against anger (Matt. 5:22) as did his brother James (James 1:19), and Christians throughout the centuries have named one of the so called “seven deadly sins” as being “wrath” or “uncontrolled anger.” And so, I think we will need to be cautious as we ponder the way that the prophets express divine anger towards situations of injustice to come to a healthy conclusion about this. At the end of this sermon, I will open up a space for us to have further opportunity to think about the possible role of prophetic anger in our own lives. But lest we forget about our prophet for today, let us now turn to ponder more seriously the message of Amos, whom I’ve playfully dubbed “Angry Amos” for this sermon. He is a prophet that deserves a bit of an introduction.

On the very first Sunday of this worship series on the prophets, we talked a bit about how we are sometimes introduced to the prophet through their “call” story. Isaiah’s call, which we looked at, was quite dramatic, experienced as it was through a vision of God, high and lofty above the temple with the train of God’s robe filling the temple. In Isaiah’s vision, his lips were touched by a live coal and God sent him with a message of judgment and hope for the people. Not all prophet call stories were quite so dramatic. While we don’t know a lot about Amos’ call story, we know that it must have happened amidst the regular ebb and flow of his life as a farmer of sycamore fig trees and a pastoralist. In the seventh chapter of Amos, we hear Amos basically balk at the idea that he is a prophet, saying: "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.' (Amos 7:14-15).

Unlike other prophets like Huldah (who we will hear about in a couple of weeks) who were employed in a King's royal court as a court prophet, Amos made his living far away from the centers of power. Reading this passage made me think, "Watch out!" – God can call any of us! It also occurred to me to think of all the farmers we have in and connected to our community now and historically, including at least a couple of Amos' – Amos Snyder, Father of Dave and Marie and Brother to Paul Snyder, and Amos Martin – Father to Martha Snyder. These Amos' were, like the Amos of the Bible, also farmers, although I don't know enough about them to know if there were any prophetic tales to be told about them. It would be interesting to hear more from the Snyder and Martin families about their stories sometime.

Returning to the call of Amos, I'd like us to imagine, for a moment, Amos tending his sheep and working to care for his Sycamore trees, when over a period of weeks he begins to hear a voice interrupt his work or maybe he begins to struggle with a knot in his stomach combined with an inner-nudge that he has to go North, to the capital city of Samaria and the religious center of Bethel, to speak God's judgment against the injustices taking place there. I like to imagine that Amos, who lived in the south and was almost certainly aware of the different political tensions present between the southern kingdom (Judah) and the northern kingdom (Israel) and the surrounding nations, must have come to a point where he could no longer ignore God's nudges. He didn't, it seems, go willingly at first – he described his call as God "taking him" from doing his work and transplanting him up North for this prophetic task. I wonder too, though, if Amos had had some concrete experiences with the kinds of injustices and wrongdoings he would call out on behalf of God.

Did Amos, a humble farmer, see the poor being exploited when he brought his animals or his fruit to sell at the markets? Did he see people buying off judges to sway court cases their way

(2:6)? Did he see people being sold like commodities (2:6) while the super-rich lived lives of luxury and opulence? Did he see low-wage laborers become increasingly poor the more they worked? Did this make him angry? I like to think that Amos' call, however reluctant his response to that call might have been, emerged along with or out of his own righteous anger at the injustice he saw taking place around him – anger especially at how he saw the poor being treated. Maybe Amos too, cried out, “Oh God, how can my anger in the face of this injustice give life?” and maybe God's call to him was Amos' answer: “Go, prophesy to my people. Don't let anger destroy you or lead you to enact your own injustices – channel your anger instead for good by publicly naming the wrong in the world, by standing up against the wrong you see around you. Go, tell my people that injustice and unrighteousness are seeds that will sow only one end: destruction.”

Interestingly, while Amos seems to have felt especially called to go North to Israel to proclaim judgment, his message ends up aiming in all directions. In the 9 chapters of Amos, he proclaims judgment and coming destruction not only against Northern Israel, but pretty much against all the surrounding nations as well.⁴ And then, as if anticipating the response of those who might say, “Who are you to come from the South to expose our sins and foretell a grim future for us while ignoring the sins of your own kingdom in the south,” Amos also directs God's judgment back to his own home region too. No one ends up escaping the scrutiny of the prophet, not even the super pious, the religious class, or those in the employ of the temple. We heard earlier this morning that memorable verse from Amos where God declares through him:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. (Amos 5:21-23)

⁴ This is a common approach taken by Prophets and scholars often label prophecy directed at other nations as “Oracles Against the Nation” which is often shortened to the acronym “OAN.”

It is the line that follows these harsh words that has been made so memorable by Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of it in his "I have a dream" speech:

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(Amos 5:24)

What are we to make of the words of this farmer turned angry prophet and advocate for the poor? I think if we find ourselves uncomfortable with his words, we are in good company and are taking the first step in the right direction. Far worse, I think, would be if we felt we could write Amos' words off as just some quaint, ancient, uneducated farmer who had anger issues, who didn't understand the way "the world works," or who simply was too idealistic for his own good. If we don't acknowledge Amos' prophetic anger, and dare I say in Amos' anger the righteous anger of God, and if we don't join Amos and God in feeling angry with injustice too, then we might just be the ones against whom Amos' words find their most fitting audience.

By now some of you may be thinking, "righteous anger in the face of injustice is one thing, but God doesn't just call Amos to express anger, he calls him to announce the threat of destruction upon God's people because of their injustice. Must we believe in a God who is not only slow to anger and abounding in mercy but also a God whose "wrath is poured out like fire?" Can we really worship a God that threatens violence and destruction on those who perpetrate injustice and unrighteousness? This is a good question and one that I struggle with too as I read prophets like Amos. It is important to be honest readers here and say that, for the ancient prophets, it doesn't appear that this tension was very present for them – for them, God had the right to enact this angry, devastating judgment on the people and indeed being sovereign over

history, God was directing the course of the nations in the way God pleased.⁵ So, if Israel and Judah would fall, this would likely be because of God and likely as a form of God's just punishment. Reading the prophets, I have tried to reconcile their view of God with my own understanding of God as the God who meets our wrath and violence with peaceful and imaginative alternatives, persuading us to and co-creating with us a new and better way. I have come to the conclusion that it is probably best to learn to live with the tension between many of the prophet's views of God and my own. Personally, I need to learn from angry Amos and his advocacy for the poor so that I too can open myself up to the call to preach against injustice, even if I don't share all of Amos' assumptions about God's punitive judgment. For myself, I choose instead to believe that God's judgment can be understood most times as actions reaping their reward in the form of natural consequences. What is the natural end facing a society that perpetuates injustice and refuses to reform itself? Perhaps it is precisely the destruction the prophets so often declare. But surely, we must believe that nothing is ever inevitable – that with God's help people can make better choices and that things can get better, and I believe this message is also at the heart of the message of prophets like Amos.

Indeed, in Amos the message is not finally anger and judgment. Remember, our prophets preach judgment *and* hope – or perhaps even better we could say the trajectory in the prophets moves *from* judgment *to* hope – it always aims in the direction of hope for transformative change. “Something's not right, *but* things can get better.” Amos believes this too, as he describes God at work to bring restoration to God's people. And so, after all his prophetic pronouncements of coming judgment against injustice, Amos too declares on God's behalf:

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

⁵ In fact, sometimes the prophets were angry when God relented and showed mercy to those who were deemed worthy of judgment (such as in Jonah).

and eat their fruit. 15 I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God. (Amos 9:14-15)

I can't imagine that this vision of renewal expressed by Amos is meant to be taken in any other way than comprehensively including the poor that had been ignored. In a renewed life for God's people, restored fortunes would be shared and rebuilt cities would be place where all would have a place to live and work, where the fruit of vineyards and gardens would be shared by all and none would be trampled in the dust of the earth while others lived in luxury.

Earlier I had suggested that maybe Amos had cried out to God asking "how can my anger in the face of injustice give life?" and that maybe God's call to him was Amos' answer: "Go, prophesy to my people. Don't let anger destroy you or lead you to enact your own injustices – channel your anger instead for good by publicly naming the wrong in the world, by standing up against the wrong you see around you." I want to give *us* an opportunity to take a moment of silent reflection now to ponder what injustice in our world makes us angry and ask how God might be calling us to channel that anger for good. Melodie will play the tune to the song "how can our anger give life?" about 4 times through, and while she does that, I invite you to ponder the reflection questions on the screen. May the God who turns over tables of injustice, guide us in channeling our anger, so that we might play our part in shaping a world where justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. AMEN

Questions:

"What injustice angers you?"

"How might God be calling you to channel that anger not for destruction, but for good?"