

Speaking Truth to Power

Pentecost XXV

Text: Amos 7:15-16

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"... and the Lord took me . . . and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel. Now therefore hear the word of the Lord.'" Amos 7:15-16

In our survey of the story of Israel, the Hebrew Scriptures, we came two weeks ago to Israel having moved into its Promised Land, into Canaan. It was after a century of more of existence in that land as the tribal confederacy where the tribes lived pretty much independently, but came together annually to renew the covenant, at a time of crisis, and where God would then raise up a leader for the occasion. After that period of time of settling in, there were voices being raised that they wanted a king – they would be like other nations. The great spiritual leader, Samuel, prophet, priest and judge, gave them a stern warning. He reminded them that they were a people who had been born in the exodus, set free by God from the oppression of tyranny, and he warned them that to put a king on a throne would be to put themselves in peril of returning to that same kind of tyrannical rule. The king would tax them, take their sons and daughters, conscript an army. They would come under the heavy hand of a ruling power. But nonetheless, the people said, "Give us a king."

So the tribal confederacy moved into a monarchy and Israel began to reflect the same kind of life as the nations around it, but with this exception. With the rise of the monarchy there arose in Israel a voice of the prophet. The thing that made Israel's history unique was the fact that there was a prophet to speak the Word of God into the social context, into the political arena. The prophet was not a predictor of the future. The prophet was a preacher who addressed the contemporary situation in the name of God. So Israel was spared that which was true of nations around where the king considered himself sovereign, accountable to no one. The prophet never failed to remind the king that he was king according to the grace of God, and that he was accountable to God. So the prophet arose in Israel to keep alive the Word of God in this new situation. The prophet was one who was not interested in power, who had no political agenda, but rather was consumed by the Spirit of God.

We speak of the inspiration of the prophets. The word itself, *inspiration*, means to be inspirited, to breathe in. We often speak of the Spirit of God, knowing that it is the same word in Hebrew as the "breath of God" or the "wind of God." The wind of God rippled the sails of the prophet. And often times the prophet would rather not have opened his mouth, but as Jeremiah said, "The word of God was like a fire in my bones." The prophet was consumed with the word that had to come to expression.

It was a risky business and a costly business. Think of one who followed in the steps of those Old Testament prophets, Jesus himself, who died the way he died because he lived the way he lived. In our own century, think of a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who dared to stand up against national socialism in that Nazi regime, and paid for his prophetic ministry with his life. The role of the prophets and martyrs goes on and on. The prophet that arose in Israel with the rise of monarchy was Israel's greatest gift to the world, shaping Israel's tradition more than any other institution and, I believe, shaping western culture, western civilization probably more than any other institution I can think of. The prophetic word that reminded all arrangements of power that they were provisional, that they were transitory, and that they were not ultimate, that ultimately every arrangement of power on the right or on the left was accountable to Almighty God, who alone is sovereign Lord in the arena of history. The prophet believed that God *observed*. The prophet believed that God *cared*. The prophet believed that God was concerned. The prophet believed that God had structured reality such that wrong action would bring dire consequences, and therefore, the prophet stood in the arena, the marketplace of his day and proclaimed a Word of God to whomever was in power.

The example that I use this morning to show the rise of this office in the history of Israel was Amos. We could go almost anywhere in those prophetic books, but Amos was particularly classic in the clash between the prophet and the king. Amos began his ministry in the north, probably around 760 B.C.E.. Jeroboam II was on the throne of Israel. The great world empires were engaged with their own affairs and it gave breathing room to Israel. Israel, the northern tribes now, prospered, expanded, grew affluent, and the social structure began to rot. The words of Amos were directed at a social condition in Israel that did not reflect God's requirement of justice and righteousness and mercy in the land. Amos was a preacher. And, he had rather good technique.

If you would read the book of Amos, you would find that Amos begins his prophetic preaching, "Thus says the Lord: 'For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four I will not revoke the punishment.' " And the crowd began to gather. Then he went on, "For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment." The people began to feel the energy flow. He moves to Tyre and to Edom, and to the Ammonites, and finally he moves to Moab. The people at this point were already to break out in a standing ovation. "Give it to 'em Amos. Give them the Word of the Lord." But then he gets close to home. He said, "For three

transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment." Those of the north nodded their heads, "That's right. That southern kingdom. Give it to 'em, Amos." Then, he paused a dramatic pause and said, "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment." It is at that point that the congregation says to the preacher, "You just stopped preaching, and you started meddling." Now he was beginning to touch a raw nerve. But it was really always Israel that was the object of Amos's ministry. The Word of God that came to Amos was for Israel. All the rest was simply periphery.

Now he was dealing with his target audience, and as he preached he said,

"I hate, I despise your festivals. And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. The offerings of wellbeing, of your fatted animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an overflowing stream."

He documented the sins of the society of his day. Finally word got to the royal court itself, for Amos didn't stop at the villages of the northern kingdom, he went right to Bethel, right there to the royal court with the temple as the accoutrement of its power and glory.

Now every king has his own people on the dole, even religious flunkies. The king, Jeroboam II, had his core of priests who offered sacrifices for the prosperity of the policies of the northern kingdom. Amaziah was among them. He heard Amos preach and hurried back to the court and told the king, "This preaching has got to stop. He is saying that you will die by the sword, and that we will be exiled from our land returning no doubt with a mandate." He said to Amos, "Oh seer, go flee away to the land of Judah and earn your bread there. Prophecy there. But never again prophecy in Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary. It is the temple of the kingdom." Well, Amos answered, "I am no prophet, nor prophet's son. I am a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees, but the Lord came to me and said, 'Go prophesy to my people Israel. Therefore, hear the Word of the Lord.' "

Risky business that, daring to speak truth to power. But that was the function of the prophet, of the prophetic voice that arose along with the monarchy in order that the king of Israel and all of Israel's people would never fail to remember that God was still king, and that God still cared, and what happened to society was of great concern to God, because God cares about people, because God had set this people free, because God demands in the human community justice and righteousness and mercy. Wherever those are violated, there are dire consequences to follow. The prophet was a preacher. He often spoke of judgment because he was convinced that the world was so structured by the Creator of heaven and earth that wrong would be visited with wrath, not as an end in itself, but in order finally to effect the purposes of God. Amos was a prophet, and the prophets dared to speak truth to power.

Last Sunday I was in Amsterdam on an absolutely beautiful Lord's Day, where I worshipped in the great Westerkerk. If there is a national church of The Netherlands, perhaps that's it, where the queen is crowned and so forth. The pastor is Nico TerLinde, who two years ago visited Christ Community on a Wednesday night and spoke to us. The church was filled for this powerful preacher, who has a great work going in that secular city of Amsterdam. When he was with us he told us the story of his early pastorate in north Holland, where they invited him to come into the public school to tell Bible stories to the children. Now, if you can believe, in Holland with all of its Christian heritage, there is now a generation that doesn't even know the Bible stories. So in the public school they were inviting a pastor in, not to evangelize, not to present the Gospel so to speak, but simply to tell the stories so that the stories stay alive, as works of literature. He decided to begin with the story of Abraham. He said, "And God said to Abraham," and a little nine year old raised his hand and he said, "Does God still say something?" TerLinde said, "That's a profound question." Well, what do you think? Does God still say something? Was prophecy an institution of ancient Israel, or is the office of the prophet still alive and well in our present experience?

From the *New York Times* of October 29, I have the picture of one who looks every bit the part of a prophet — long beard, hand over forehead, eyes closed. Of course, it's Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and the report is of his address to the Russian Parliament in October. Having visited so much of the Russian people, he stood before the Parliament to tell them the people are discouraged, they have lost hope, they have no faith in the government, and they don't believe the reforms are serious. The people are in despair. He pleaded with the leaders of Parliament to be genuine about the reforms. He said, "This is not a democracy, it's an oligarchy, the rule of a few." There was a little applause, but mostly there was silence. There was some muttering, and visible exits by politicians going out for a smoke. He went on to make his plea and, although he is Russia's finest historian who has put his own life on the line and has dared speak truth to power at the jeopardy of his own life, nonetheless, when he closed with a call for speedier advance toward real democracy there was a smattering of applause, but no more. I would say that Solzhenitsyn is a prophet in our time. I would say that most often you'll look outside the institutional church for the prophetic voice. It is so often the case that the Word of God sounds from other arenas because the institutional church itself gets co-opted into the whole cultural process. No, prophecy was not simply a phenomenon of ancient Israel. It is a desperately needed office to be exercised in our day. I can understand the rise of prophecy in Israel. After all, they had been a theocracy. They had understood that God was their king. So the rise of the prophet in that tradition can be somewhat understandable.

But what about our own nation? What about today? We have to remember that as a nation we were founded in a reaction. We were founded in a reaction to the European scene, the old medieval structures, the feudal structures, the often

collusion of throne and altar. This nation's founding documents intentionally and deliberately separate church and state. That was a reaction. It was an experiment. And it has borne fruit. In the intention of our founding documents there is the preservation of the guarantee of the free exercise of religion. There is to be no domination of religion in the political arena where there are many interested parties who are all vying for their rights and their privileges, where the political situation demands accommodation and compromise and rational discussion. That has all been a positive experience in our national experience.

But in the last few decades that whole separation of church and state has come under criticism. We don't really understand how to handle it today. There have been judicial decisions that have been detrimental, I believe, to the moral fabric of the country. And there have been decisions that have not only separated church and state, but have trivialized religious devotion. Stephen Carter, the brilliant black law professor at Yale University, a couple of years ago published a book *The Culture of Disbelief*, in which he pointed out case after case of judicial decisions that not only honored the separation of church and state, but were actually prejudicial to religious commitment. Well, you say, "Maybe that's why we have the anger in the body politic today." And, I suppose it is.

Maybe you are thinking now that the Christian Coalition, the organization of the religious right has taken upon itself the mantle of a prophet. I suspect that that's what would be claimed. But I deny that that's the case. I do not deny the right of the religious right or any group to organize and to make its claims. I do not question the sincerity of these people, nor fail to understand the reason for their frustration. But I want to say to you that the technique that is being pursued by the religious right is wrong, and it is contrary to the Biblical, prophetic tradition. The prophet was disinterested. The prophet did not have a political agenda. The prophet was not seeking power. The prophet spoke truth to power. The prophet stood over against the power, whatever the organization may be. It doesn't matter whether it is right or left, whether it is socialist or free enterprise. It doesn't matter what the governmental structure may be. It doesn't matter what the economic system may be. The prophet stood for justice and righteousness and mercy and compassion in the midst of the market place, speaking to king or priest or prophet, never co-opted by the king, or the people in general. The prophet was a lonely voice, disinterested, seeking no power. My argument with the Christian Coalition, with the religious right, is that, in order to address the wrongs that it sees, it is seeking power, and if it should gain power it will lose the possibility of being prophetic. A society that does not have a prophetic voice that is disinterested and stands over against all arrangements of power is a society in peril.

History is replete with examples of religion in power, and there is no more perilous place for power than in the religious establishment. A secular ruler may be careless, may be godless. But a religious ruler with a sense of a mandate from God is absolutist like no secular ruler would ever dare be. A society will be in

trouble when there is a collusion of throne and altar. It will be in serious trouble when the altar becomes the throne. If you ever elect a prophet, you'll take away his power and he will lose his soul. The prophet stands over against every human arrangement — right or left and says, "Hear the Word of the Lord." No amount of religious observance will substitute for justice and righteousness and compassion. The prophet called people and king to love mercy and to do justly, and to walk humbly with God. Don't empower the prophet. But let the prophet continue to speak truth to power.