

What Does God See?
Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37
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Prophets are generally unpopular, wherever they may show up. They see with eyes that are not our eyes. They see with the eyes of Christ; with the eyes of the Holy Spirit, and they are not deterred by what is popular, polite, powerful, or monied. They always rock the comfortable boat, and when people and cultures become comfortable in their ways and attitudes, that is almost always when people with prophetic sight appear. That was what happened in ancient Israel between about 785 and 745 BC. By this time Israel and Judah had split into independent nations, and Amos, who was from the southern kingdom of Judah, was called by God to prophesy in the affluent northern kingdom of Israel. Our scripture lesson reflects the response to his ministry by those in power.

As you can see, God had measured Israel and found her wanting. Amos had been sent to Bethel, a sanctuary just across the border from Judah, and there confronted Amaziah, the priest to give him God's verdict on "comfortable Israel." As we see, Amaziah is anything but happy. He sees Amos' preaching as seditious. His challenge to Amos is very interesting. He says, **"Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."**

Prophets were often attached to the courts of kings, sort of as an advisor, and they were paid for their services. Since Amos was from Judah, Amaziah's desire was for him to go back and bother the southern kingdom. Notice also, that what should have been God's sanctuary is now "the king's sanctuary" and what should be the temple of God is now "the temple of the Kingdom." God sees how the sacred has become profaned and just part of the secular, commercial world of Israel. God has been replaced by the king, and priests replaced by merchants.

Amos' response was that he couldn't go back, because that was not where God had sent him. He was told to prophesy in Israel, whether it was convenient or not for him to do so. And he was going to do what God told him to do, whether Amaziah liked it or not. If we read the whole of Amos, we find Amos calling a very comfortable, elitist society to God's bar of justice. His basic message is that we need to measure our ideas, judgments, and actions by their impact on the littlest people in society. For example, women, who have been exploited and walked on since the beginning of time. The poor who have no power. Children, migrants, and people of color who are cast aside in so many countries, and certainly in ours. Widows, orphans, and the infirm who have no way to voice their needs to the powers that be. Refugees who are utterly dependent on another nation's goodwill. And then, of course, there are those that we just

want to turn away out of disapproval—the homeless, the alcoholics, the drug users, and the prostitutes. Yet they are, every last one of them, children of God, and but for the grace of God, there go I. They are all my brothers, sisters, and neighbors. How can I not speak and act on their behalf?

There have been numerous prophetic voices in modern times, not all of them being Christians or Jewish. Probably the teacher of many modern prophetic voices was Mahatma Gandhi. The beginnings of his prophetic mission were in South Africa as he discovered the exploited position of Indian workers in the country. I believe his first public act was to burn his ID card that every Indian was required to carry. That got him beaten and arrested. After he was released, he continued to defy the government's actions against Indian citizens in the country, getting himself arrested on multiple occasions. He used non-violent opposition effectively, as well as the hunger strike. Finally, the government acquiesced on the issues he was highlighting, and when they did, he left for his home in India.

But once in India, he discovered all was not well there. The British were in charge, and his own people were being exploited and used to British ends. Once again, he used non-violent opposition to power, willingness to go to jail, and the hunger strike to move the immovable. One instance stands out for me. The British had a monopoly on salt, and Indians were forbidden to make it. Salt is essential to life. In protest, Gandhi and his followers went to the gates of a salt works, and though warned to stay away, they marched rank upon rank to the gates where they were struck down with clubs by their own Indian police. Over 300 were badly injured that day, but not one of the demonstrators raised a hand to defend themselves. That is non-violent opposition to power. In the end, however, Gandhi was finally assassinated, paying for his prophetic insights with his life.

These same tactics were employed in the fight for women's suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment, a fight that is clearly far from over. Women historically in so many societies have been non-persons, as has graphically just been shown in the last few days. A woman by the name of Alice Paul was in the forefront of this non-violent fight for women's rights. She was a Quaker and began her work in England. There she was arrested multiple times and used the hunger strike effectively. In the end, while imprisoned she was force fed, severely damaging her health. She returned to the United States and began lobbying immediately for American women to gain voting rights, standing on the shoulders as such luminaries as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. A major event was the creation of the "silent sentries" who dressed in white picketed the White House for months. Many were arrested and jailed under horrible circumstances. Alice Paul was one of those. When the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was finally ratified in 1920, Alice Paul was a prime mover in that event. She went on to lobby for the Equal Rights Amendment which still has never been passed.

As you can see, power hates prophetic voices who lobby for the under privileged and the down trodden. Today, the "Kings Sanctuary" in the United States is in Washington, DC, and our state capitals are miniature copies. Too many in power today seem to stop caring about life, once it is born into this world. Why else would there be such opposition to affordable health care, day

care for children, a living minimum wage, clean air and clean water, and universal access to the ballot box? Power knows only power, not love. And as our passage shows, Amos condemned such self-centeredness and such lack of caring for God's children. It is tempting to want to affirm Dante's vision of hell for those who care so little about other people's welfare. One has a feeling that there should be some sort of retribution for the harm that people cause. But retribution is not the Lord's way. I have a feeling that our ultimate consequences will be the anguish we feel when we finally realize what we have done to our world and to others when we recognize who Christ really is.

A prophetic voice, with which we are all probably familiar, is that of Martin Luther King, Jr. His preaching and his actions rallied thousands of people to the cause of down trodden blacks in the south. Their sole error was being born black, which basically permitted anyone to abuse and use them. They came to this country in slave ships. They were sold. They were sexually exploited. They were beaten, starved and overworked. When emancipated they were still on the bottom of the ladder. The book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson is an astounding trip through what black persons in American have faced from whites, the majority of whom would have claimed to be Christians. One cannot have done what they did to the blacks, if he or she had any relationship with Jesus Christ.

A prophetic voice must be prepared to suffer. King certainly suffered. He was beaten and jailed multiple times. Those who followed him faced attack dogs, water cannons, police batons, rocks, and continual verbal abuse. Some were even killed. Without the courage of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Legislation signed by Lyndon Johnson in 1964 would have never been enacted. The price? A bullet on a Memphis, TN, motel balcony. Prophetic voices suffer.

I think it is becoming clear that those of us who value human life, human rights, and human dignity are becoming more and more the minority. I don't want to be defeatist, but I frankly have real trouble seeing the larger landscape changing for the better. Arrogant power will be more and more concentrated in the nation's capital and in the state capitals. Laws are being drafted at the state levels to silence the more progressive elements in society, because a lot of those voters are from minority communities. Thus, it becomes incumbent on us as Christians, in our daily lives, to live out the message of Amos and Jesus in our own little corners of the world and in our own little neighborhoods.

Amos says, "Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph." In the local area, in the town of Marshfield, it is more possible to live this way and control our environment with direct involvement here in city and school life. We can be more conscious of the needs of our neighbors, and not pass them on the other side of the road. The Samaritan gave us a good model to follow in these divisive times. He was hated by the Jews, just because of who he was, but he transcended that exclusion, by refusing to be excluded. He reached out in compassion to a person that even that man's own people didn't love enough to stop and help. I had a friend who once said that you cannot win a spitting contest with a camel! How true, so it would be good if we could all try consciously to bridge the gaps that now exist in our society. We don't have to agree on every

issue. But the United States has become a replica of the Israel of Amos' day. It is a top down, power hungry, consumer driven society which sadly leads only to spiritual death.

The prophets do not pull any punches. They are not fun to read much of the time. It is because they look at human society through God's eyes, and he doesn't like what he sees. But prophets and prophetic voices are also always mirrors, asking us to look at ourselves and how we are maintaining the values Christ taught us in our own lives. I may not be able to change the society or the dynamics around me, but with God's help I can change me. I can become more just, more kind, more empathetic, more generous, and more loving. We can make First Presbyterian Church a better Christian Community. We can make Marshfield a more inclusive community, and together we can make Marshfield a more compassionate place to live, if we will learn to see through the eyes of God.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.