

How to be a Prophet
 Delivered July 15, 2007
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 Amos 7:7-17

I've got a simple quiz for you, just to see if you were listening to today's reading of scripture. In our passage for today, if it were to be re-written as a script for a cowboy movie, who would wear the black hat and ride the black horse? Possible answers are:

- a) the prophet, Amos,
- b) the priest, Amaziah,
- c) the King of Israel, Jeroboam.

Ok, you have your answer?

If your answer to the question was b) the priest, Amaziah, you get a gold star! Amaziah is the black hatted cowboy riding the black horse, who robs the bank and shoots the sheriff dead. If on the other hand, your answer was Amos, we're signing you up for remedial scripture-listening classes!

The reason for our little quiz is to make you aware of something that continues to niggle at my soul in a way that it probably does not niggle at your soul—that is, that often in scripture, it is the person with the religious title--the priest, the levite, the Pharisee, the Sadducee and the scribe, who does not even come close to making it on God's top twenty list. *Jesus* has lots of names for these religious folks. He uses epithets like: blind fools, brood of vipers, snakes, hypocrites, and prophet murderers—and then Jesus gets nasty.

Our prophet Amos doesn't use epithets, but he does spend a fair amount of time lambasting religious leaders, and the religion that they are practicing. Amos apparently, finds Amaziah, absolutely despicable. Despicable—do you remember how Daffy Duck said that word, with a pronounced lisp and shooting saliva, “Despicable?” We don't know if any of the Biblical prophets did that, but scripture says that they drooled when they were in the middle of an ecstatic frenzy—So both Daffy Duck and Amos had something in common. Spittle.

Amaziah is so despicable that Amos predicts that God will punish him by killing off his children, prostituting his wife, sending off Amaziah to die in a foreign, Gentile land and driving the people of the Northern Kingdom into exile. Ever notice how the God of the Old Testament seems less like a loving father and more like Attila the Hun?

Why would God be so angry with Israel's priests, the ones, who after all, have dedicated their lives to serving God? Amos is a small book, so this week I read the whole thing through looking for reasons that God might be angry with the priests of Israel. I found two reasons.

One, the priests, it seems, are only going through the motions of worship—Their worship is hollow; it's a fraud. In other words the priests have divorced religion from life. They may be good at formulating high minded concepts; their prayers may bring tears to the eyes; they may be keeping to the rules of ritual. Their thoughts and religious practices are far removed from everyday practicalities, like feeding the poor and taking care of the sick. They are living in ivory towers.

Speaking of ivory towers--The first class I took at Wesley Seminary met in the evenings. It was led by Dr. Sharon Ringe, a gifted professor who as they say, . "Opened the scripture to us." One evening, a group of us was chatting outside, near the entrance to the seminary building. We had just finished our class with Dr. Ringe. We were on a spiritual high, having listened to spellbinding scriptural interpretation from a master. Dr. Ringe came out of the seminary building, said good night to us, and then headed to the parking lot. We watched as she walked up and down, up and down, the rows of cars. After a long five minutes, she walked back to us, fuming and frustrated and said, "I can't remember where I parked my car. I'll have to wait until you guys drive off, so I can find it."

It's one thing to be so absorbed in religious thoughts that you forget where you parked the car, but what if Dr. Ringe had been so absorbed in religious thought that she have overlooked a homeless person, dirty and begging for loose change in that parking lot? That's Amaziah. That's the priests of Israel.

There is another reason, though, that God is angry with Amaziah in particular and Israel's priests in general. You who earned gold stars for your excellent scripture listening skills: Did you get that from our scripture passage? Amaziah is in the King's back pocket—I'm using that metaphor, sorry, even though I realize that pockets hadn't been invented yet—but you get the drift--Amaziah is in King Jeroboam's back pocket. How do we know that? Amaziah says so. He says to Amos, remember: "Go, flee away to Judah... but never again prophesy at Bethel, **for it is the king's sanctuary** (not God's sanctuary) **and it is a temple of the kingdom.** (not God's temple)"

Who is this king Jeroboam, whose sanctuary is in Bethel and who owns the priest Amaziah? This week, as I read through the book of Amos, it came to me that he must have been, if not the devil, at least, a strong second to Lucifer himself. King Jeroboam is responsible for growing the gap between the rich and poor. Amos says elsewhere in his book that the wealthy, in fact, are living in houses of ivory, hyperbole for sure, but you get the idea; meanwhile the poor are being sold for silver and even for a pair of sandals. Israel's people have given themselves over to amoral activities. too--like incest and worshiping other Gods. Most worrisome of all, King Jeroboam has sent troops into neighboring countries to pillage and oppress. And where is Amaziah—the priest who like other priests is supposed to have no other God but God? Instead of speaking God's word to the King and the nation, Amaziah first licks his finger and tests the air. Finding a strong wind blowing from King Jeroboam's direction, he climbs the steps to his ivory tower and closes and bolts the door.

Here we need to pause and consider Amaziah's predicament. Since I am a pastor, I particularly feel for him, even if he is portrayed as the villain in our scripture passage. We understand, don't we, why Amaziah doesn't choose to be the bearer of bad news? We know what happens to messengers, after all. And there is something else.

Soon after our nation declared war on Iraq, the head pastor at my previous church, preached an anti war sermon--this to members of a congregation in Northern VA, some of whom hold leadership positions in our government. That sermon caused a temporary rift in the congregation. The pastor was criticized as being unpatriotic. Several members even called the Presbytery hoping to have him defrocked, or at least fired. Amaziah was no fool. He did not want to cause any rifts. So he holed up in his ivory tower, where he could think lofty thoughts and come down only occasionally to offer the nation the aforementioned empty prayers and rituals.

With no one else to speak God's word, God calls on Amos. As Amos himself says in one of his prophecies, "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants, the prophets." Amos makes the long trip to Bethel, and prophesies in the king's sanctuary there. But Amaziah licks his finger and tests the wind again. Then he sends poor Amos packing.

The priest Amaziah might have been able to protect the Northern Kingdom from **Amos'** harsh words, but he can't protect the country from its tailspin course to disaster—not that he even tried. In the year 721, some 20 years after Amos' prophesy, the Assyrian Empire enters the Northern Kingdom, torturing and decapitating many of its inhabitants and forcing into exile those Jews who survive the slaughter. We don't know if Amos was still alive at that time to enjoy a sad, but presumably satisfying, "I told you so."

There are so many ways that we could go with this true tale of disaster. We could talk about our current government, and how our presidency has become a kind of monarchy, like Israel's monarchy. We could talk about our nation's widening gap between the rich and the poor, like the widening gap in Israel. However, I would like to talk some more about the role of religious leaders and the role of prophets.

In a monarchy, like ancient Israel under Jeroboam, the priests were the nation's checks and balances against government corruption. They were supposed to serve as conscience to the nation, and the king. As we discovered, though, Israel's checks and balances, again, the country's religious leaders, sometimes failed to do their job. And that is the primary reason, I think, that God had it in for Amaziah.

In our day, and in this country, we have our own system of checks and balances—it is called the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government. That doesn't mean, however, that our religious leaders have no political role to play; Every once in a great while our own American system of checks and balances fails. When this happens it is up to our **religious leaders to** serve as conscience to the President, and to the nation. They are the fourth line of defense (after the three branches of government) against corruption. Sometimes, alas, like Amaziah, they too are put in someone's back pocket. That is when God calls out the prophets.

That is what I was thinking, by the way, last Saturday night as I listened and watched the Live Earth concert. I was wondering why the Live Earth concert was not sponsored and promoted by our government. Then I drew a mental line between the Northern Kingdom and the United States. “Oh, I see,” I said to myself. Again, I wondered, “Why is the Live Earth concert not sponsored and promoted by religious denominations? What a fine thing that would be—for Buddhists and Muslims, Christians and Jews to come together for the purpose of cleaning up God’s good creation!” But then, I drew a mental line between Amaziah and our religious institutions and organizations, and I said to myself, “Oh, I see.”

Finally, I thought, “God has called out the prophets. For surely the folks who are speaking out against global warming are prophets. They are God’s fifth line of defense against corruption (fifth, after the three branches of government and religious leaders).

Who are these prophets? These are folks who do not hold government office, and who do not have religious titles and I’m looking at them. They are you and people like you! They are people who have decided to take important matters into their own hands when the government and religious leaders won’t.

I started off this sermon with a history lecture and a quiz, so, just so we keep to the theme of today—which is school-- I want to end with a homework assignment. Go home and read through the book of Amos. Like I said it is a short book. See if you, too, don’t see the parallels between then and now. After that, you might think of some ways that you, too, might serve as prophet to the nation in the manner of Amos. Next week, I just may give another quiz! Amen.