

“Silencing the Prophet” Amos 7: 7-9, 12-17 Rev. Janet Chapman 7/14/19

I remember growing up and listening to my grandfather talk about WWII, about fighting at the Battle of Normandy and serving his country to the best of his ability. In the mid 70's, it seemed like such a foreign time but I was curious about all the dynamics. I remember my dad telling me about Japanese Americans placed in concentration camps after Pearl Harbor. I remember my mom talking about the Jews trying to sail to America fleeing Nazi Germany prior to the war who were turned away. All of it seemed a world away so it became fascinating and exciting. It was so far from my protected teenage existence in Wichita, KS that it felt like I was reading a work of fiction. Last Friday, I was reminded again of this true life story of Jews fleeing persecution by the Nazis, over 900 of them traveling nearly a month at sea only to be turned away first by Cuba, then the US, then Canada. Cuba had assured them entry while they awaited asylum in the US but then Cuba revoked all but 28 of their visas. The Americans responded, “you must wait your turn on the list” even though Roosevelt briefly debated giving them sanctuary. Ultimately, the impending war took attention away from the desperate refugees and they were passed on to Canada who touted, “if they find a home here, then they will be followed by other ships so the line must be drawn somewhere.” Therefore they had no choice but to turn back to Europe. For approximately half of those who ended up surviving the trip, it turned out to be a death sentence. Ship survivor Susan Schleger told a Miami reporter in 1989, “We were not wanted, abandoned by the world.” As the years past and more and more was revealed concerning the conditions of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, the world responded “Never again...never again.” In 2012, the United States Department of State formally apologized to the ship's survivors and in 2018, Canada followed suit. Not only was it considered the right thing to do for the survivors, but it was done in honor of all those World War II vets

who gave their lives that America might be the land of the free and the home of the brave for all people, not just for those who were born here. As I heard this story retold, I wondered what had happened to my fascination with World War II; why didn't I want to hear any more about it? I had had enough. I didn't want to hear about Jews trying to find safe sanctuary; I didn't want to be reminded of Japanese being locked up at will simply because of the country they originated from. The stories didn't offer that same excitement they once did. I wondered what had changed?

I certainly didn't want to hear from the prophet Amos this week. Prophets are such pains and Amos is one of the worst. Just when things seem to be going smoothly, they start making waves refusing to just go along with the program as society mandates. Prophets are spokespeople, not fortune tellers, as Frederick Buechner notes. They have the amazing audacity to claim they speak for the Creator of the Universe and there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that anyone ever asked a prophet home for dinner more than once. They were drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness, no one was ever comfortable. With a total lack of tact, they roared out against phoniness and corruption wherever they found them. Amos wrote 2800 years ago but his prophecy reads like a Twitter alert; his story should come with a warning label like "not recommended for children," or "side effects include severe political and spiritual discomfort."

In Amos' era, king Jeroboam forged a kingdom characterized by territorial expansion, aggressive militarism, and unprecedented economic prosperity... all at the expense of the poor. Privatized religion was the name of the game ignoring the poor, widow, alien, and orphan. The religious leaders catered to political and economic status and supported exploiting the weak.

The Israelites are eagerly looking forward to the day when the Lord will come and take care of the crap they still have to deal with on a daily basis and make life even better. Amos tells them they had better start looking forward to something else, because when that day comes, the Lord is going to settle some crap alright, but it will be against the people of Israel who have caused so much havoc on the most vulnerable of society. Speaking from the pessimistic and unpatriotic fringes, Amos is definitely blue collar more than blue blooded. Quoting God, he says in chapter 5, “Your rock masses bore me just as stiff as your fake preachers; your Facebook groups and Sunday services at the White House cause me no less abdominal discomfort than your high-priced cross jewelry and commercialized worship performances. Justice is what I want, not syrupy public gestures, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Because Israel has forgotten what is most important to God, Amos speaks about its demise. But Priest Amaziah suggests he shut his trap, leave Judah at once and never prophesy again. His actual words reveal how much the priest has dared to connect religious faith with established power as he says, “Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.” These words should send chills up and down the spine of anyone who has ever considered sucking up to power, of relinquishing integrity and ethics for the sake of prestige and status, of keeping silent in the midst of injustice and the mandates of God.

This week, I finally got to see that wonderful remake of Aladdin. I loved the humor, the music, and several of the messages woven throughout. One such message is entrenched within the #metoo movement. In it, Princess Jasmine is kept silent because of her gender despite her obvious wisdom and skills in leadership. Disney takes us on this wonderful carpet ride to a

whole new world where the voice of a princess is as respected as the voice of a prince. We find ourselves cheering for this young woman whose voice is finally heard and leadership is recognized despite those who would keep her silenced. Disney isn't the only one who is championing the cause of prophets who have been silenced. That wildly popular Handmaid's Tale series actually went so far as to show women with their lips stapled shut as an ultimate reaction to voices of dissension. The insinuation is that unless we ensure that freedom of speech is protected, we may all lose our ability to speak truth to power. You get the idea that none of these characters set out in their lives to make waves, but if you think about it, no prophet really does.

Amos reminds Amaziah that he didn't set out to be a prophet; he's not some professional prophet descended from a legacy of prophets that can simply pick up and move to another town when things get complicated. Amos was simply minding his own business tending his flock of sheep when God called him to do what he is doing. If the priest has a problem with it, take it up with God. But Amaziah isn't real thrilled at that prospect. It is much more appealing to deny his responsibility in the situation and redirect the attention away from the heart of the matter, thus accusing Amos of spreading fake news. But Amos won't be dissuaded or bullied. He has some rough words to hand back to Amaziah and any other leader who would dare prostitute religion for the empire: "Your wife will become a whore, your kids will be violently murdered, enemies will carve up the country, you will die far from home, and pagan Assyria will devour the political and economic empire you have tried to sanction in God's name."

Despite the church's checkered history in relationship to power, privilege, wealth, and turning away from aliens seeking asylum, there are those who won't stay silent. We don't like what they say, we try to get them to stop talking, we've had enough already. There are the big names like MLK, Dorothy Day, Romero, Mother Teresa and then there are the lesser known, Dr. William Barber, founder of the Poor People's Campaign; Richard Rohr, Phyllis Tickle and Marcus Borg; and then there are those we meet day to day, some of whom are sitting in this very room and who dare to take a stand on behalf of the persecuted. Consider for yourself who are the prophets God has placed on your path? Prophet, professor and New Testament scholar Will Willimon used to say to his parishioners when they came up to him complaining about Sunday's sermon, "Don't get mad at me! Be mad at Luke, or Mark, Matthew, John, Paul, or yes, even Amos. I'm just telling you what they said." Either God is still active in our lives and speaking to us through scriptures, people, nature, and events around us, or... I really don't know what we are doing here.

All of us can choose what we do with the words we have been given. If we choose the way of Amaziah, we mistakenly believe that we stand or fall on our own words, our own privilege and knowledge; we choose the safe path which keeps the tough stories, the broken and needy far from our existence. If we choose the way of Amos, we remember that we do not stand on our own words but that of the Creator of the Universe. We stand with the persecuted, remembering the mistakes of our past while dedicating ourselves towards not repeating them. It won't be easy, but with God's help "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."