***“Troubling Prophets”*** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, July 11, 2021

**Amos 7:7–13**

9 The Lord said, “The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

10 Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. 11For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’” 12And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; 13but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

**Mark 6:17–29**

17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, because Herod had married her. 18For John had been telling Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” 19And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. . . 21 An opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it. 23Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.” 24She went out and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” 25 She rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” 26The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not refuse her. 27The king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

We don’t have prophets as a recognized part of society, as the ancient Jews did. A prophet was understood to be a truth-teller, a special envoy of God, more important than a king. Moses was a prophet. The people were supposed to listen to a true prophet. They didn’t come saying, “I got some good news and some bad news,” because sometimes the bad news dominated.

We have here two stories about truth-telling prophets and the people in power who feel threatened by them. Amos predicts the fall of Israel, the northern Hebrew kingdom. The chief priest of the northern kingdom, Amaziah, tells him to go back to Judah, the southern kingdom, where he was born, because the land cannot bear his words. Legend says that Amos was eventually killed for his prophesying, although that comes not from the Bible but from a popular piece of writing called *Lives of the Prophets*. It certainly is possible that he became a martyr for his teaching. Not only did he prophesy the killing of the king and the exile of the upper classes, he attacked the greed and corruption of the wealthy classes of Samaria, the capital city. Amos said “you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain . . . you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate” (5:11–12). He pictures God as saying, “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 . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?” (5:21–25). The implied answer to that question is “no.” He is one of the two prophets who boldly challenge the notion that God established the sacrificial cult in the first place. Jeremiah is the other (7:22).

Amos called for people to trust God and be loyal to the covenant values, which includes fair dealings in the marketplace and honesty at the city gate, which is where judicial hearings took place. He and other prophets like Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah taught that society is only healthy and workable when the basic values of honesty and fairness are practiced. These prophets also questioned the sacrificial ritual system. Sacrifice was taken for granted as a necessary ritual, in the religions of neighboring countries as well as in Israel. Amos and Micah could not stand the notion that correct ritual practice magically made people alright with God. Criticizing this view got them many enemies among the priesthood.

780 years later, John the Baptizer made enemies of the wealthy priests of his day, when he called them a “brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matt 3:7). He thought they were not bearing “fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt 3:8). They were proud of being “children of Abraham,” but their fruit was not good (3:9–10). Their *deeds* were not good.

Of course, John also made enemies out of Herod and Herodias, Herod’s wife, who had previously been married to Herod’s brother, Philip. John pointed out that this marriage was in violation of Jewish law, and the story tells us that Herodias felt personally threatened by his preaching. While he was already under arrest for his preaching, Herodias arranged to get him killed.

Jesus’ earliest disciples, Peter and Andrew, were initially part of John the Baptizer’s organization (1:35–37, 40). Except for this mention of John’s followers coming to take his body, we hear no more of John’s organization after his death. It is likely that most of them went over to become part of Jesus’ movement. They recognized Jesus as, at the very least, another true prophet.

What really matters, as regards prophets? It is the *values* for which they stand. Hebrew prophets were advocates for certain fundamental values. They wanted a society where the marketplace was not corrupted by dishonest scales and weights, where the courts were not corrupted by bribes and favors for relatives, where taxation was not designed to make poor farmers lose their land, and where greedy gangs could not rob and beat weaker people. They spoke up for the values of *mishpat*—justice; *hesed*—lovingkindness; *emunah*—truthfulness. Jesus, too, speaks up for these values, denouncing the Pharisees for rationalizing avoidance of the need to support one’s aging parents (Mark 7:10–13), attacking the wealthy scribes who used legal chicanery to “devour widows’ houses” (Mark 12:40), and condemning the priests for making the temple into a “den of robbers” (Luke 19:46). But especially was he angry about dishonesty and hypocrisy, the hard-heartedness of scribes and Pharisees who made showy prayers and wanted to be seen whenever they gave a coin to a beggar (Mark 12:38–40; Matt 6:2). He excoriated them for not only not going into the kingdom of heaven, but also, “when others are going in, you stop them” (Matt 23:13). Jesus spoke as a prophet at those times.

Jesus shared the prophets’ disgust with dishonesty and with showy and superficial religion. An important part of understanding Jesus is recognizing his moral instincts, such as his distaste for lies, but also his respect for an honest widow with her two coins (Luke 21:2–4).

The lesson for us to take home today is that we should be loyal to the values that God recommends. We should back the honesty and fairness that make life livable for ourselves and others. We must not “neglect the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt 23:23). We may need to ask for God’s help in being effective advocates of right living, and people who practice love. Amos said that God “reveals his thoughts to mortals” (4:13). And that’s the prophet’s good news! So we *did* have some bad news and some good news, after all. It’s good news that we can be loyal followers of God-thoughts and values. True values are the weightier matters of the law.