

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
October 20, 2024

A Prophetic Church

Amos 7:10-17

The relationship between religion and politics has always been part of the story of America, especially when it comes to elections. During the current campaign season, candidates from both parties are vying for the support of religious voters and drawing upon religious themes and images in order to make their case to the public. What we're currently seeing and hearing is simply the latest manifestation of a long-running narrative about the connection between God and country, faith and the flag.

In 8th century BC Israel, there wasn't a whole lot of emphasis on the separation of church and state. We see this in today's text, which opens with some high-level communication between the priest and the king. Amaziah, the priest, is the senior pastor of the royal sanctuary at Bethel, the religious capital of the northern kingdom. So this sanctuary isn't just any old place of worship. This is where the king, Jeroboam II, and his family worship. This is the house of God where news crews show up from time to time in order to get some footage of the king, big smile on his face, waving to the crowds as his lovely wife and beautiful children follow him up the steps to the sanctuary entrance.

But behind the scenes, the king isn't smiling. He and Amaziah are currently clashing with Amos, a prophet who has shown up speaking truth to power, forecasting dark days ahead for the nation. Amos's message threatens the cozy relationship between religion and politics. As I mentioned, Amaziah is the king's pastor, the head minister of a large and prominent congregation that requires multiple staff members, all of them on the royal payroll. Put all this together, and you've essentially got a situation where the preacher is working for the king.

So when Amos shows up in Bethel, criticizing the congregation's worship and pronouncing judgment on King Jeroboam and his administration, you can understand why Pastor Amaziah starts getting nervous. This kind of disruption simply can't be tolerated. This fiery traveling preacher is upsetting the status quo. He's making life hard for those who prefer to keep present arrangements in place. And this is more than just a matter of a few confrontational sermons. To Pastor Amaziah, Amos isn't just a voice for change. He's the voice of conspiracy. He's a threat to King Jeroboam's rule and authority, a menace to the stability of the kingdom.

Because this alliance between the palace and the sanctuary is pretty tight, Pastor Amaziah comes to Jeroboam and says, "Don't worry, king, I've got your back. I can use the authority I have as head of the sanctuary here in Bethel to make sure that Amos doesn't keep giving us trouble." We don't know exactly how the king responds, but we do know that Amaziah proceeds to confront Amos face to face, and essentially tells him to pack up his Bible and go preach somewhere else. Now, notice that Amaziah doesn't deny that Amos's messages may very well be coming from God, and that there's a lot of truth in what he's preaching. He doesn't necessarily treat Amos with hatred or scorn. Amaziah simply

wants Amos and his prophecies gone. The sanctuary and the palace have too much to lose by allowing Amos to continue his ministry in their territory.

This confrontation between Amaziah and Amos certainly isn't the first time that the prophetic voice, with its call for repentance and change, gets rejected or removed. Being a prophet has never been easy. Those who need to hear a divine word of judgment and reform usually don't roll out the red carpet for the Lord's messenger. There's no billboard on the edge of town announcing, PROPHETS WELCOME HERE! Instead, being prophetic usually involves being resisted, rejected, and perhaps even silenced.

Our Lord Jesus himself knew this in his own life and ministry. While he was certainly more than a prophet, there's no denying that he was absolutely prophetic. His very presence, his message, his ministry, regularly came up against people, practices, and institutions that didn't want to hear about or conform to the new reality of God's kingdom that had arrived through him. That's because receiving the good news that Jesus preached and practiced also meant receiving the bad news that was built into it, namely, that we need to turn away from the values and ways of the world that is passing away, and turn toward the God whose new world has dawned with the coming of Jesus. That kind of turning always requires painful, costly change. And the prophet's job description always includes issuing that call for change.

So we shouldn't really be surprised that being prophetic is part of every Christian's job description, and every church's job description. When we think about prophets and prophecy, we often think about people who foretell the future, who predict events and outcomes based on their interpretation of various Bible passages. We associate prophecy with ministries that focus on a particular scenario of events leading up to the coming of Christ, the end of time, and the establishment of God's kingdom.

There's no doubt that announcing God's plans in advance, and declaring where things are headed, was part of the assignment for many of God's messengers. But being prophetic was usually more about telling forth the truth than about foretelling the future. And telling forth the truth in a way that called for changed behavior in the present. Amos wasn't getting on King Jeroboam's case, and Pastor Amaziah's case, just because he liked being able to predict the future and hurl fire and brimstone from the pulpit. Amos was aiming his sermons at the palace and the sanctuary because God expects righteousness from his people and from their institutions. God had called and created his people to be a sign of his reign in the world, to be a living prediction of where creation was headed in his saving purposes. God had established his people, but now they were satisfied with just being a religious establishment.

This is a word of warning to us in our lives as individual Christians, and especially in our life together as the church. We who have been called by God and claimed by God in Christ, we who have been sent to be a sign of what life is like in God's dominion, we too become satisfied in our religiosity, content with present arrangements, and oblivious to injustice, oppression, and immorality in God's world and in our lives. Remember that God has commissioned us to be a prophetic community of disciples, a prophetic church. But in order for us to be a prophetic congregation, we too need to receive, not silence, the prophetic word of God in all the ways that it's sent to us. If we reject God's prophetic voice, like Amaziah telling Amos to hit the road and not come back anymore, then we cut ourselves off from the very word that can revive and reform us.

Remember that God's finger isn't just pointed at the world. It's also pointed at us, his people. It's pointed at religious leaders like myself, charged with the task of forming a

congregation that proclaims God's righteousness in a lost, broken, and rebellious world. When it comes to writing insightfully about pastoral ministry, one of my favorite authors is Eugene Peterson. In his book, *Working the Angles*, he writes about our distorted notions of success, and how this contributes to many pastors leaving the ministry. Peterson says:

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.

Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations. Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping, to be sure, but shopkeeping all the same. . . .

The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God. It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades.¹

Here in our community of redeemed sinners called Grace Baptist Church, a large part of my ministry is about keeping us attentive to God. And as we're attentive to God, what we'll often hear is God's prophetic voice speaking against us whenever we strive more for being a successful religious institution than being a Spirit-filled witness to the truth of the gospel.

I like the way I once heard another minister put it when he spoke about how his congregation, like all churches, needs to step back, do some self-examination, and reflect on what we're all about. Are we about "feathering our own nest," settling comfortably into our own blessings, or are we about being a blessing to the part of the world here where God has placed us? When we look closely at the job description for a prophet, and for a prophetic church, we don't see "keeping shop" or "feathering our own nest" as major priorities, do we?

I once got an email advertising a good deal on church chairs. The heading read: "Preach Longer. . . with More Comfort. . ." It was followed by this summary: "When you preach you don't want uncomfortable chairs limiting the impact of the spoken Word. You need comfortable chairs from Bertolini, and in today's economy, you need a deal!" Apparently, the more comfortable you the listeners are, the more attentive you'll be to God's word, or at least the better my preaching will sound. I can't help but imagine Amos reading an email like that and wondering, "Really? Cushioned chairs for the worshipers? Isn't that already part of the problem with the sanctuary at Bethel? They're already too comfy, especially with the status quo."

Remember that the Amos whom the religious and political establishment chased out of Bethel is the same Amos who had earlier proclaimed what God was saying to his people: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your religious assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream!" (5:21-24).

So being prophetic isn't just about declaring what God doesn't want but also what God does want, namely, righteousness, from his people and in his world. By the time we reach the

end of the book of Amos, we see that his message is about more than just exile. It's ultimately about redemption and restoration and the flourishing that comes with doing what is right. That's because prophets aim for more than just dismantling the status quo. They also point the way toward rebuilding, casting a hopeful vision of renewal.

During this election season, and all seasons, God has given you, and me, and our church, a prophetic calling. To be a mouthpiece for righteousness in a world that often prefers to ignore God's voice. To be a place of redemption in a world that often ignores or overlooks the least and the lost. To be a community of reconciliation in time of division and strife. To be a fellowship of peace in a climate of violence. To be an example of generosity in an atmosphere of greed. To be a source of hope in the fog of despair. To be faithful to our prophetic calling in a world where God still reigns.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: the Shape of Pastoral Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 1.