

Preacher: Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Amos 3:1-8

There was a young man named John who had long red hair and a red beard. He dressed very simply and was often just dirty enough that I wondered if he was homeless. John came here to church periodically for about a six-month period and he fascinated me. I believe the first Sunday John was with us he helped me tear down chairs in the fellowship hall following a potluck lunch. He never asked for anything; rather he only ever asked what he could do for me. He rarely answered personal questions in a way that revealed much about himself. Where are you staying? Oh, around. Where are you from? I'm a traveler, a wanderer. Well, how long do you plan to be in Hagerstown? Oh, a little while, then I'll move on. I got the impression that John lived from some kind of mental health diagnosis.

John however, loved to talk theology. He loved to pick my brain about God's love, about why bad people exist, about what Jesus' death meant, and about what was to come. And always, he wanted to call people to repentance and a right relationship with Jesus. I started to wonder if John was his real name or if he saw himself as a John the Baptist figure, preparing the way of the Lord, one town at a time. Then when his conversation became more apocalyptic, I wondered if this John saw him as John of Patmos from the book of Revelation. The last time I saw John, he invited me to participate in his prophetic witness traveling to West Virginia. I told him my ministry was here and he was gone.

Some of you might remember John. Some of you probably wondered about this different man and why he talked so strangely. I remain puzzled by him and his prophetic overtones. And now that we are on the cusp of reading the books of the prophets, I remember him again and his rather bizarre way of being and how similar Biblical prophets really were to John with their mannerisms and lifestyles. Sometimes the mouthpieces of the Lord come from rather unusual places.

For eight weeks now, we've read what our series calls the Covenant History books of the Old Testament and they do read a bit like a history book, filled with genealogies, laws, the chronicles of kiingly transfers, wars, and kingdom boundaries, and critical stories in general that shift the historical narrative. But now, we read a different style of literature all together. You see, now the prophets get their chance to offer commentary on the historical account—a commentary spoken into those days and years which offers a voice from the Lord. So, the prophets' works will be a mix of prose and poetry, narrative and oracle, stories about what the prophets did and then moments when we hear the prophets speaking to the people or kings or foreign nations on behalf of the Lord. It'll be important for you to note which style of writing you are reading in the moment. Usually our Bibles help us by offsetting the sections of scripture that we could call speech, oracle, or poetry.

But the biggest question I want to help us answer today before we begin reading these prophets is "What is the role of the prophet?"

Old Testament scholar Michael Coogan reminds us that there are all sorts of different kinds of people that would fit in the prophetic spectrum of the ancient world. He lists "palm readers, fortune tellers, and psychics to inspired proclaimers of divine messages, or prophets."¹ So what sets our prophets apart. Well, 1 Samuel 9:9 names an interesting linguistic shift in the Biblical Narrative in the context of describing Samuel's occupation: it says, "Formerly in Israel, if someone went to inquire of God, they would say, 'Come, let us go to the seer,' because the

¹ Coogan, Michael. *The Old Testament: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 78

prophet of today used to be called a seer.” Linguistically, the people move away from calling prophets seers because to be a prophet is a greater responsibility than to merely attempt to see the future.

Bob Hulteen wrote on this greater responsibility in a Sojourners article: “Within the Christian tradition, rarely is a concept more misunderstood than prophecy. Unfortunately, this misinterpretation wreaks havoc on our society in the form of doomsday soothsayers, apocalyptic dreamers, and militant revolutionaries. The crux of the misunderstanding is this: Prophecy is not the result of seeing into the future. Instead, prophecy is the faithful declaration of the implications of current actions on the future, with the hope of having an impact on both. For instance, one need not be a rocket scientist to figure out that increasing economic inequities lead to social dissolution and fragmentation. So, someone with the courage to say that wealth accumulation leads to the destruction of community and that the result will be a future awash in violence isn't looking into a crystal ball. They're simply sensitive to inevitabilities.”²

I think Bob Hulteen is on to something important in that to prophesy about the future is not necessarily some magic like foreknowledge; sometimes, it is simply wisdom thinking through the ramifications of current actions. However, I'm not sure Bob is correct that all future oriented prophecy is this. So, the role of the prophet includes, yes, speaking on behalf of God concerning future events, but also using divine wisdom to help people see where their actions are leading them; and finally the prophet acts simply as an intermediary between God and the people.

Knowing that the prophets claim all these roles, let's look at this little oracle I chose from Amos for today. Again, an oracle is a text when the prophet is speaking on behalf of God. In this oracle, the Lord speaks through Amos in a series of rhetorical questions like, “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so? Does a lion roar in the thicket when it has no prey?” The point of these questions seems to be simply that every effect has a direct cause. Therefore, the judgment upon Israel has a direct and justifiable cause. But also, at the end of the oracle we learn that Amos' prophecy has a direct cause in that the Lord has spoken to him, and God has chosen to enact none of this judgment without first disclosing it to the prophets. The text says in verses 7-8, “Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets. The lion has roared—who will not fear? The Sovereign Lord has spoken—who can but prophesy?”

This verse identifies that the Lord is in desperate need of wise prophets who are willing to proclaim the unpopular but faithful, the adversarial but righteous and just truth. The Lord needs prophets but who will step up.

For weeks now as we have read the Old Testament Covenant History books, we have seen a rhythm to these ancient stories. The people are amazed and compelled to follow the Lord, the people forget, bad things happen, the people return to the Lord, they forget, bad things happen, the people return to the Lord, they forget....I think you get the idea. There exists this natural rhythm of turning to and from God. This rhythm goes on for centuries, and if it goes on that long, I think we are prideful if we don't think the same rhythm exists today.

We turn to and from God with the same frequency as any one of our ancestors. As we read these texts, maybe it seems ridiculous to us that they would keep forgetting God, but this is out of context in retrospect. In our own context today, we turn from God and replace him with other pursuits constantly; maybe in ways we can recognize only from the vantage point of heaven. I'd rather have power, or notoriety, or a friend, or money; and I can convince myself

²Bob Hulteen, "Once a Millennium," *Sojourners*, July-August 1998, 65.

easily that God wants these things for me too, but we are a selfish people that doesn't really know what we need. We need the Lord; we need to get out of our own head; and, yes, sometimes we need to be confronted by the Lord telling us what's really going on here.

This is the roll of the prophet. Prophets confront what is really going on here. And for the next eight weeks as we read the prophetic books about prophets speaking truths to the people of Israel and Judah, I want us to allow these texts to confront us with the same truths that might correct our own behaviors. May the prophets speak anew to you and me. May they be a cause for us to turn to the Lord, the Lord alone.