

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; July 14, 2024

Amos 7:10-15

“God’s Prophets Call, ‘Repent!’”

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel:

Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to endure all of his words. This is what Amos says: “Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will certainly go into exile away from its own soil.”

Then Amaziah said to Amos, “You seer, get out of here! Flee to the land of Judah. You may eat food and prophesy there. But you must never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the sanctuary of the king and the national temple.”

Then Amos responded to Amaziah:

I was not a prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet. Rather, I was a sheep breeder and I took care of sycamore fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending flocks, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”

Here is the short version of the story: “Go away, Amos!” “No!”

Here is the long version: The man who says, “Go away, Amos” is named Amaziah. Amaziah is a priest. “Good for him!” you say. “Priests are good.” But wait. I didn’t tell you who he was a priest for. Not for the Lord. Amaziah was a priest for a golden calf, an idol the king had set up.

See, here’s what happened before this story. Israel had been one unified country. But after King Solomon died, there was a civil war and the country cracked in half. The southern kingdom was called Judah and the northern kingdom kept the name Israel. The Lord’s temple was in Jerusalem, the south. And the kings in the north said, “We don’t want our folks travelling down there to worship the Lord in the temple. They’ll spend their money down there; they might even get ideas about staying down there. So we’ll make our own gods with their own temples right here in the north.”

So they set up two temples, one at Bethel and one at Dan, with golden calves for the people to worship. That’s where Amaziah was a priest: not in the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem, but in the Golden Calf’s temple in Bethel.

Needless to say, the Lord did not care for idolatrous calf worship in the northern kingdom of Israel. But the kings of Israel didn’t care if he cared. They were wicked through and through. The Israelites in the north worshiped statues, built altars to every god except the Lord, and even worshipped with human sacrifice and acts of sexual immorality. The north was thoroughly evil and thoroughly unbelieving.

And that’s where our friend Amos comes into the story. Amos wasn’t from the north. He was from the south, Judah. And he liked it there. Amos believed and served the Lord, and worshipped in the Lord’s temple. And like every believer in the south, Amos wanted nothing to do with the north. But the Lord said, “Tough, Amos. I pick you. I pick you to go north, into the hornets’ nest, and call those unbelievers to repentance.”

Amos went. He left home and went north to Bethel, right into the heart of all that wicked idolatry. When he got there, the Lord gave him three visions. The first vision was of locusts coming to consume that

northern kingdom of Israel. **When the swarm had finished consuming the vegetation of the land, [Amos] said, "LORD God, please forgive!" The LORD changed his decree about this, "It will not happen," said the LORD.** Amos sees destruction coming from the Lord and prays for patience, for more time for these people to repent. And the Lord says, "Yes. I will give them more time."

Then Amos had a vision of a fire coming up from the under the earth and consuming land. When he saw it, **[Amos] said, "LORD God, please stop!" The LORD changed his decree about this. "This will not happen," said the LORD God.** Another divine threat of destruction; another plea for patience; another yes answer.

But then came vision number three: **I saw the LORD standing by a wall that had been constructed with a plumb line. He had a plumb line in his hand. The LORD said to me, "What do you see, Amos?" I said, "A plumb line." Then the LORD said, "Look, I am about to set up a plumb line next to my people Israel. I will no longer overlook their sin. The high places of Isaac will be desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined. I will rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."** Jeroboam was the king. He and his people were now officially doomed. The Lord's patience had run out. Israel was going to be conquered, carried away, and ultimately wiped off the map. King Jeroboam's whole house was going to be cut down and extinguished. When the world saw it happen, they would see the dreaded Assyrians swinging the sword. But really it was going to be the Lord working through them. The idolatry, the unbelief, the wickedness, the refusal to repent...time was up for King Jeroboam and Israel. It was over.

Amos' message was destruction for all who refused to repent. And that is still the message God gives his faithful prophets to proclaim, because it's still God's truth. The Son of God himself preached, **"But unless you repent, you too will all perish."** God demands that every sinner must repent, which is to turn away from sin and toward him for forgiveness. When the Spirit works repentance, then there is a happy message to proclaim: the good news of God, his Word that in Jesus all sin is fully and freely and immediately and permanently forgiven. But where there is no repentance, the message of God's condemnation for unbelief stands. It's still the message he gives his prophets to proclaim.

And when they do, those who do not repent do not appreciate being told they're dead meat. Here's what Amaziah, the idolatrous, unbelieving prophet of the golden calf did when he heard Amos' message: he tattled on him; he turned him in to the king: **Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to endure all his words. This is what Amos says: "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will certainly go into exile away from its own soil."** Technically, Amaziah misquotes Amos slightly. Amos didn't say Jeroboam would die by the sword; he said his whole family would die by the sword. Otherwise, everything Amaziah says is accurate. It's even accurate that Amos was conspiring against King Jeroboam. It was a conspiracy of two: Amos and the Lord! A conspiracy to speak the truth of what was really going to happen: death, destruction and exile from the Lord as punishment for Israel's refusal to repent.

Of course Amaziah doesn't want to hear this stuff. Amos is threatening his livelihood and his relevance and his king; he's even threatening his life! Of course Amaziah wants to shut Amos up. So first he reports him to the king, and then he tells him to go back home to the south, to get back to where he came from: **Then Amaziah said to Amos, "You seer, get out of here! Flee to the land of Judah. You may eat food and prophesy there. But you must never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the sanctuary of the king and the national temple."** When God's prophets preach repentance, those who refuse to repent will respond in all sorts of ways. Some laugh. Some quietly turn away. Some argue. Some get nasty. Some try to hurt the prophets. Some try to make them go away.

A good prophet will not go away, even when the unrepentant get mean. And why not? Pay close attention to why Amos will not quit and go home. It's not because he enjoys telling the Israelites they're cooked. It's not because Bethel is lovely this time of year and he wants to be there. In fact, you'll get the sense that Amos isn't enjoying himself at all. You'll get the sense that if it were up to Amos he wouldn't be here at all, he wouldn't be saying these things at all; he wouldn't be bothering anyone or making any commotion...if it were up to him. But it's just not up to him: **Then Amos responded to Amaziah: I was not a prophet, nor was I a son of a prophet. Rather, I was a sheep breeder and I took care of sycamore fig trees. But the LORD took me away from tending flocks, and the LORD said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."** For all of Israel's idolatry and unbelief, the Lord still loved her. He still calls Israel "my people." Back then, it still wasn't too late. So the Lord took Amos away from his home and his work; the Lord made Amos his prophet; the Lord gave Amos the message of repentance. If Amaziah wanted to blame someone for this, he should blame the Lord. And you almost get the sense that Amos blames the Lord just a little bit, too.

There is a message in this for pastors and Christian teachers like me. Speak the Word of God. Proclaim his Word, including the parts that make people angry. That goes for everything unpopular in God's Word, but this is about repentance especially. Proclaim repentance even when people refuse to repent. Tell people destruction is waiting for them if they don't. Tell people God's grace is universal, but it only comes through faith in Jesus; so turn to Christ and Christ alone for forgiveness and salvation. That's the message for me, and people like me.

This is for you: expect your pastors and teachers to proclaim repentance. It was the central message of Jesus' ministry: Repent for the forgiveness of sins. Turn away from your sin and turn to me for forgiveness and eternal life. It is the message he sends the disciples with in today's Gospel: **They went out and preached that people should repent.**

But wouldn't there be more people in here if we told them they're just fine the way they are, that they don't need to change a thing about their beliefs and behaviors, that they'll get to heaven any which way? First of all: no, there wouldn't. The pastors and churches that have abandoned the message of repentance are even emptier than the ones that still preach it. Who's going to come to a church to hear they don't need to repent, that they're just fine the way they are? What's the point of that? Community...maybe. But community based on what?

And what about the people who are repentant? What about you? Repentance is not something you do once and then check off a list. Repentance is the life – the every day life – of a Christian. We are – every day – to return to baptism to drown our sin and rise to live in Christ, every day to hear and answer God's call to forsake sin and cling to our Savior for forgiveness.

And there is the real reason to cherish the message of repentance for yourself and others: at the end of repentance is Christ's full and free forgiveness, and the divine assurance of life in heaven. Christian repentance does not require a five or twelve or twenty step plan or process. It is simply to believe, to trust in your heart: in Jesus, my damning sin is obliterated. His righteousness covers me. His blood washes away my sin. The heaven he opened is mine in him.

God calls all people to repentance because he loves all people; he sent his Son to live and die for all people; he wants all people to turn from their sin, to Jesus for salvation. He wants those who have not repented yet to do it, and those who have to renew their repentance every day.

So, yes, there is a lot here for someone like me. People like me to be good Amoses who take God's call to repentance and trumpet it, whether people like it or like it not, whether they turn to Jesus or stay in their unbelief and just turn nasty. But there is also a lot for people like you. People like you need to be anti-Amaziahs, people who welcome the call to repent for yourselves and for others. Because, in the end, it's God's call. And it's his call to save us in Christ. Amen.