

The title for today’s message is “The Lord’s Prophet and the King’s Priest”. As we get into the passage, Amos 7:10-17, [it is] the conclusion of that chapter. It has been a long time, way back before Christmas, since we last listened to Amos. At that time the message dealt with Amos 7:1-9. If you look at those verses, you will see that in chapter 7:1-9 there is a conversation. That conversation is between the prophet and the Lord. They have a conversation with each other about the Lord’s plan regarding what He is going to do with Israel, the northern ten tribes. What the Lord lays out are three potential ways in which He will exercise judgment against that very stubbornly wicked, resistant, rebellious group of people, especially the [social and economic, ruling] elite.

With a bit of surprise, if you go back [over all that Amos has said prior to this], we hear Amos pleading with the Lord, don’t judge so harshly. This is somewhat of a surprise because Amos has laid it out in terms of what a truly wicked people they are and resistant to God. So you would think that if anybody was in favor of the Lord and saying, “Let them have it”, it would be Amos. But instead he cries out – you can see this in 7:2 and 5 - and says, “O Lord God, please forgive. How can Jacob stand? He is so small.” “O Lord God, please cease. How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” What we recognize, what comes through is that what has motivated Amos is not just his faithfulness to God, but also his love for Israel. Amos does not want God’s chosen people to be destroyed. The same motivation that prompts him to speak the truth so they will hear it and change, prompts him to cry out to the Lord, “Don’t bring judgment now; don’t bring a judgment that wipes them out!”

Sin is death, and Amos does not want Israel to die. But it is a fact that whereas in the covenant that God made with His people, and by which they actually became His people, He gives the promise of life, still God did not promise life to those who have no faith and in fact who turn away from and reject Him. The promise does not excuse that or cover that. How had they done [these things]? If you recall how we have travelled down through the book of Amos, they have worshiped false gods, and perhaps more relevant for us is that they had worshiped the true God falsely. They had worshiped the true God falsely; they used His name and the used the patterns of worship that He set in place, but their hearts were not focused on God. They were focused instead on what they were going to get by manipulating God through their various practices.

So we see in the third of the judgments (7:8) that God reveals to Amos that He has a plumb line, a plumb line that is like a standard of measure. The application of that standard of measure is designed to make it clear who is and who is not a part of the people of God. In line with all that Amos has already said in the first six chapters of his book the first targets of God’s judgment will be where the [ruling] elite carried out their selfish and ceremoniously elaborate worship, the royal house and the temple in Bethel.

Today’s message – hopefully that has been just enough to get us back into that frame of mind or perspective – today’s message deals with Amos 7:10-17. Once again we have an account of a conversation. The first conversation was between Amos and God; this conversation is between Amos and Amaziah, [between] the prophet and priest of the king.

(7:10) “Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. (7:11) For thus Amos has said, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.”’

(7:12) And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and

*prophecy there, (7:13) but never again prophecy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”*

*(7:14) “Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, ‘I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. (7:15) But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, “Go, prophecy to my people Israel.” (7:16) Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. “You say, ‘Do not prophecy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’ (7:17) Therefore thus says the Lord: ‘Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”*

The inclusion of this encounter between Amaziah and Amos, the Lord’s prophet and the king’s priest, serves as a kind of microcosm of the larger dynamic of Amos’ prophetic ministry to Israel. Amaziah symbolizes the whole of the wealthy ruling elite in Israel. He is a priest, as he pointed out to Amos in v. 13. He is a priest in the king’s sanctuary, a temple of the kingdom: he spells that out. Based on what we have heard regarding the over-the-top religiosity [of the ruling elite in Israel], what do you think that temple was like? There are probably two things the temple was like: 1) it was undoubtedly lavish. Remember these are people who give multiple tithes; they give way beyond what they needed to. You can be quite sure that this royal temple was elaborated with every form of decoration and extravagance they could think of. Secondly we can be quite sure that it was very busy, that there were people there all the time. It was the center of action. It was where the “good people” went; it is where you went to demonstrate your tremendous religiosity; it was where you went to also show off the way the Lord had blessed you with all manner of wealth. That was the mind-set that dominated the ruling elite, the social elite.

As one of the commentators pointed out, imagine Amos arriving [there]. He was a farmer, a poor farmer because that was the kind that took care of sycamore figs. He was a poor farmer from the foothills of Judah. What would he look like? This rustic, uncouth man walks into the midst of this most sophisticated, wealthy bunch of people engaged in worship. No doubt he was personally as unwelcome as his message. A commentator went on to make the observation that it is a near certainty that those who speak God’s truth in the world will encounter resistance, trouble and even danger, and you especially get yourself into trouble if you speak against the popular religion of the day. There is a reason for this. It is important to keep in mind that hypocrites do not necessarily own up to their own hypocrisy. More than that, they don’t necessarily recognize that they are hypocritical. In the case of Israel, scholarly research substantiates that most of their ceremonies and sacrifices, their tithes and religious festivals and all the rest were done in the name of the Lord and after the Law of Moses. So things look good!

The problem was not what they did, but what they didn’t do. The problem was what they left out. What did they leave out? What they left out were the moral demands of the law. The problem was a problem of their hearts. Jeremiah made this observation. You might recall it from Jeremiah 17:9, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.”* What the heart needs, what our hearts need, is precisely the soul cutting demands of the moral law to open it up to the forgiving grace of God. If we arrive in God’s presence and have no consciousness whatsoever of our need for His grace, then we come proudly into His presence and consider ourselves to be the richly blessed and those who in fact stand head and shoulders above all others because we are quite magnificent in our religiosity. And in all of that not a shadow of doubt may cross our minds but that we are indeed exactly what

we think we are. So if a people decide that they will worship God without subjecting themselves to the moral demands that God makes upon them, they will fall prey to that worst of all sins, pride, for pride says, basically, “I do not need the grace that You give.” So we cannot say that the people who worshiped in the temple under the direction of Amaziah the priest were insincere in what they did there. The issue, of course, is what they left out.

But a test now comes for Amos. Will Amos be able to hold his ground as he stands before what was undoubtedly a very sophisticated, articulated man who was full of his own assurance because of his high privileged and the position of power that he occupied? What sort of accusation does Amaziah throw at Amos? The first thing is that he is engaged in a conspiracy. He tells [king] Jeroboam, this man is involved in a conspiracy, secret dealings with others to cause trouble in the kingdom, most specifically to undermine its power and have it be destroyed by some foreign enemy. He misrepresents what [Amos] had to say. Amos had never said anything about Jeroboam being killed. [Amaziah] distorts his message; he blends truth with lies, and therefore ends up giving a very false representation of what Amos had to say. Amos had just lumped the king in with the rest of the people of Israel. He is not engaged in a conspiracy at all; he is speaking openly.

Second Amaziah proposes what might be a tempting alternative. First he misrepresents Amos’ ministry as if he is a conspiring enemy of the state, that then he says, “Amos, why don’t you go home? Rather than staying here where you are not wanted and your message is not well received, why don’t you go home? There you can eat bread (you can live well); there you can preach all you want and people will be delighted to hear what you have to say. I am sure that people in Judah would love to hear a lot of bad things about the bad people in Israel. Why don’t you go down there to a group of people who are going to say “Amen” to everything you have to say?”

The test, you see, that Amos is being challenged with is why is he in Bethel? Why is he there? Is Amos in Bethel in order to make a name for himself, representing himself and thinking of himself as the brave prophet who boldly says dangerous things to people who won’t like to hear them? Amaziah makes this point: “You know, this is the center of a dynamic religion and it is the temple of the king.” Bethel at that time combined the maximum authority of both religion and royalty. Really, does [Amos] want to appear a fool in the presence of these wealthy, articulate and very religious people? These are the tests that Amos has to deal with.

I do not know that Amos actually wrestled with all those questions the way I put them in front of us. But they are the questions that we face, the kind of testing that comes to us when we are challenged as to whether or not we are willing to speak for the Lord to people who do not want to hear what we have to say.

We can be sure that Amaziah was neither amused nor pleased, and he wanted Amos gone. We really cannot know what Amos thought of Amaziah’s statements, but we are told how Amos responded in Amos 7:14-16 we have a powerful lesson in the obedience of faith. This is what Amos said:

*“I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now therefore hear the word of the Lord.”*

To understand Amos’ reply we need to remember that in ancient Israel there were schools of prophets. We tend to think – I certainly did for most of the years of my growing up – that prophets were all like Amos. That they were people innocently walking along the road and all of a sudden God reached out of heaven and said, “I want you to

be my prophet!” But that is just not the way it was. They had schools of prophets. You can see this if you have your Bibles, particularly the Reformation Study Bible, the English Standard Version in I Kings 20:35. This is what it says, “*A certain man of the sons of the prophets said to his fellow. . .*” The Study Bible has a note: “This designation does not mean the physical children but members of a prophetic guild or association. Elijah and Elisha were probably leaders of such groups.” So, common practice amongst the people there in Judah and in Israel was that men would join these groups and receive what you and I would consider to be seminary type training. They were trained in the Law, they were trained in the worship practices, and they were trained as those who were to speak the Word of God to God’s people. Further, just as some today pursue religious training for less than pure reasons, some are in it for the money, some preachers are in it for the prestige, some preachers are in it for the sense of power, some, like me, just like telling other people what to do! But we understand that prophets had all kinds of mixed motives. So when the testing comes, the purpose of the testing is to press the standard of God’s righteousness and holiness against the man’s inner sense of integrity so that he would understand what it is that moves him, what it is that calls him, what it is that gives him courage to stand, or do I have the courage to stand? The testing is necessary. Amos is tested. Amaziah’s suggestion is that Amos return to Judah for a much easier place of service, better pay, better food, better reception from the crowd: now you begin to appreciate Amos’ response. What he says is, “No!” What Amos says is, “I am not a prophet’s son. I am not a professional prophet. I am not doing this for the money. I am not doing it for fame. I am a farmer and a herdsman. That is what I am. But as a farmer and a herdsman, I understand that I am just a servant. I am just a servant of the Lord. The Lord took me and the Lord said to me, ‘Go prophesy.’ Notice that Amos does not even bother to respond to Amaziah’s implicit appeal to the authority of Bethel as the royal sanctuary and temple of the nation. What are these compared to the authority and dignity and majesty and just claim to loyal service by the Lord God of hosts? As has already been said, the Lord has spoken, who can but prophesy?”

Amos was a prophet. As such he felt the weight, the obligation to say all that God had given him to say, and to say it to whomever God sent him. The apostle Paul gives to us exactly the same perspective. Listen to what he says: “*If I preach the gospel, that gives me no grounds for boasting, for necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*” This, of course, is the inner heart, the sacred passion of the one who has been called by God. Is that our passion?

Amos’ response to Amaziah concludes with 7:16-17.

*“Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. ‘You say, “Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.”’ Therefore thus says the Lord: “Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.””*

In an earlier message I cited a commentator named Motyer who made this observation: “The fearful solemnity of religious error.” This is somewhat hard for us to grasp in our age. We live in an age which doubts truth and exalts personal freedom. We are willing to excuse almost anything if it is done with sincerity. We believe that sincerity of heart and sincerity of mind are the criteria. Our cultural biases, however, are not the measure of God’s truth; they are not the plumb-line of God’s judgment.

What I think about when I wrestle with the word, I think about those perfectly sincere people who stand behind pulpits and advocate things that are contrary to the Word of God. You know that James says that not many of you

should become teachers for you will be subjected to a higher standard of judgment. We are wrong to throw the accusation of hypocrisy at those who disagree with us. Rather if their disagreement manifests a misunderstanding and mistaking of the word of God we should grieve for them, pray for them and seek by any means possible to expose them to the truth so they can turn and get away from the path of death into which they are walking and into which they are leading those who follow them. It is too easy for us to be judgmental and condemning when we are called to be compassionate and caring and seeking that others would enjoy the blessings that are our portion.

In an earlier message I observed that we have little reason to consider the worshipers in Israel to be insincere, at least no more so than people generally are, for every group of people is a mixed bag. More often than we like to admit people are sincerely misguided or in error, even if and when they ought to know better. We tell ourselves partial truths and we believe them! One of the most outstanding forms of self-deceiving idiocy amongst evangelical Christians was the whole debate that came up some [30] years ago as to whether or not you could take Jesus as Savior and not take Him as Lord. It was bizarre! And yet people of great learning and deep sincerity held to the position that, yes, you could take Jesus as Savior, but later on decide to obey his commandments. What idiocy! But nevertheless... Long conversations amongst many with good intentions finally corrected that error in almost all sections of the evangelical community and it is no longer a held belief. We should not assume that Amaziah is a hypocrite or a grasping scoundrel. He may have been but he doesn’t need to be in order to say the things that he has been recording as saying. We learn that he is a father and he has children. Consider what that means. The likelihood is that he loved his children: don’t you think? Because they are his children they benefit from his high position. But of course because they are his children they will also share in the judgment that falls on him.

What Amos describes for Amaziah is worse than total ruin. Just put yourself into Amaziah’s shoes and listen to what Amos has to say to him. Amaziah, do you love your wife? The path you are taking she will end up a prostitute. Amaziah, do you love your children? The path you are taking they will end up being killed by the sword. Amaziah do you love your nation? The path you are taking will take your nation into exile and ruin. Amaziah, do you love being of the people of God? The path you are taking you will end up in a foreign land, an unclean land and that is where you will die. It would have been better for Amaziah just to have died. But that was not the option offered. It is too easy for us to throw out judgment and condemnation for those with whom we disagree and to lose sight of the compassions of God. For the compassions of God would say, “Let us bring the truth to bear upon those who are in error, and perhaps by the grace of God their ways will be corrected, 2 Timothy 2:24-25. Speak gently to those who are in error and perhaps by the grace of God they will be corrected in their error and they will come back again to the way of life. We should be praying for those Presbyterians – I am dead serious! If you know anything about the United Presbyterian Church they are deep into apostasy; so is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America deep into apostasy, so are the United Methodists deep into apostasy, so are the Episcopalians deep into apostasy – our hearts should be weeping, our souls should be crying out to God, “have mercy upon us, O God, have mercy upon us.” Because of course the conditions described of Israel are the same conditions in America.

The plumb-line has measured Amaziah and he has been found lacking. He has no excuse, of course, for the record of God’s revelation is available to him, he knew the actual terms of the covenant, he knew the moral law, he knew the expectations that were laid out. Amos was not the first or the only prophet to speak. But you know it is not just the errant religious or the errant nation: we should be praying for ourselves and asking God to make it perfectly

clear where we have in our faith deviated from His demands. For His demands are for our good, not our ill. He desires to bless us now and for eternity.

Christians specifically and the church generally have so long enjoyed a kind of default position of privileged acceptance in America just as it was in Europe before, that we I believe have a very hard time in understanding and actually believing such that we act on the fact that we no longer enjoy that respect or even acceptance. You know what the culture at large thinks about evangelical Christians. We are in their eyes both laughable and pathetic. In other words, beloved, if you make it know today in our culture that you are a practicing evangelical, fundamentalist type Christian, that you take the Bible as the word of God, that you reject evolution as the answer to the origin of species, that you in fact are one who takes the Bible literally, they will think of you as a fool and they will mock you. Whether they mock you to your face or not makes no difference for in their hearts they do. So we are very much like Amos, the rustic prophet who has come up from the hills of Judah and we are standing in the presence of those who have wealth and power and sophistication and they control all the levers of our culture and we are supposed to speak the word of God. Do we have the courage to do that? Will we have the integrity to do that? Amos had the integrity.

We are blessed. Amos had to go and speak a word of judgment. We don’t. We are called to deliver a sweet message, an invitation to hope rooted in the love of God for all who turn to Him by faith in Jesus Christ. That is the message that we are asked to bring to our world. But it still takes courage.

Please pray with me: Our heavenly Father we thank You on this morning that You have called us to Yourself, that You have opened our eyes to see the truth, rendered our hearts tender to accept it, strengthened us in the inner man to live by it. Our prayer is that we will live by it and many will be blessed. Curb our tongues, help us not to be those who are judgmental. Help us not to put ourselves upon a high stand and look down with contempt on those we consider to be in error when we handle the word of truth may its living fire first burn us and then be a blessing of loving warmth and inviting tenderness for those who need to hear the word of life. We pray this, our Father, giving thanks in Jesus’ name. Amen