

“The Prophetic Imagination”

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Luke 16:19-31

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Have you ever heard of the explorer, Will Steger? I first read about him in Bob Dotson’s book, *American Story*. Dotson tells the story this way: Will Steger is an adventurer, a man who seeks out places where no one has stepped foot before. He has traveled to the coldest places on earth where it hits 70 below. In the vast wilderness near the poles, he trudges alone through the icy landscape seeming oddly out of place. He says, “*You have to go where there is resistance. That is where the adventure lies.*”

You see, Will Steger explored the *unknown* – one step at a time – for more than forty years, living his life in swirling snow, beneath angry skies and low clouds. Traveling back and forth between the poles, however, Steger noticed the warming of our world. “*It’s only by walking on it and skiing on it, day after day, month after month, that you get a sense, really the planetary sense, of what’s happening here. Every ice shelf I’ve ever been on is collapsing into the ocean. It shows you how fast the climate’s changing.*”¹

I want to suggest that Will Steger, is a *prophet*—someone who *bears witness* and *proclaims* inconvenient, but essential truths to today’s generations.

Let’s think about this in terms of the *work and witness* of Walter Brueggemann who is one of the world’s great teachers about the prophets who both anchor the Hebrew Bible and have transcended it across history. He translates their *imagination* from the chaos of ancient times to our own. He somehow also embodies this tradition’s *fearless truth-telling* together with *fierce hope* — and how it conveys ideas with disarming language. “*The task is reframing,*” he says, “*so that we can re-experience the social realities that are **right in front of us**, from a different angle.*”²

¹ Cameron Trimble, *Piloting Church* (A Word for the Day: An Almost Daily Devotion), September 25, 2019

² Krista Tippet, *On Being* (Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination), December 22, 2011, updated, December 20, 2018

For example, the prophet Amos was a citizen of the *Southern Kingdom of Judah* in the eighth century BCE. He lived in the village of Tekoa, near Bethlehem, where he was a herdsman and a keeper of sycamore trees, neither role in life demanding high academic achievement nor the credentials that produce great expectations. In those days *Uzziah* was king of Judah and *Jeroboam II* was on the throne of the *Northern Kingdom*. The major powers of the world were preoccupied with their own problems and with each other, which allowed these two small Jewish states to enjoy a moment of prosperity, peace, and even some wealth. The distribution of that wealth was, however, hardly balanced. The worship places of the Jewish world were crowded on holy days and religion was popular among (those whom Amos calls) *the greedy ones* who dominated the social order. There *thus* appeared to be little relationship between the *words* of their ... religion and the practices of people's lives in the public arena.³

In many ways that is not dissimilar from periods in the history of Western capitalism (such as our own time), where *with more frequency than we like to admit*, the few have achieved massive fortunes by the manipulation of the markets, creating a situation in which the wealthy inevitably become wealthier and as a direct corollary, the poor become increasingly poor.

This familiar dichotomy, so frequently ignored in the body politic of the nation, proceeded to burn itself into the consciousness of this simple herdsman named Amos. That enhanced consciousness, in turn, transformed Amos into the proverbial "*Hound of Heaven*" allowing him no rest until he had addressed this issue overtly and publicly.

So, in the power of this compelling idea, he packed his suitcase and journeyed from Tekoa in the land of Judah to the king's special shrine at Bethel in the Northern Kingdom to make his witness.

When he arrived, Amos entered the courtyard of this holy place, where all his suspicions were confirmed. He saw the crowds dressed in their finery busily attending to holy things, while the poor outside the city gates were largely ignored. Amos was the picture of the unsophisticated country person who was so frequently looked down upon by the more sophisticated urban dwellers.

³ John Shelby Spong, *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*, Harper One, New York, 2011, pp. 131, 132

So, he wandered about, speculating on just how he might manage to gain a hearing. Amos was a clever man, however, and knew how to appeal to the *base instincts* of the people. So it was that he found a corner in the courtyard, set up a soapbox and then, using one of the oldest tricks in human history, began to solicit *first* the curiosity and *later* the full attention of the crowd.

“Come closer,” Amos shouted from his makeshift pulpit. *“Let me tell you about the sins of the people of the city of Damascus.”* Amos knew that everyone likes to hear gossip about the moral weaknesses of their neighbors, and so as he excoriated the Damascans as the crowds grew.

Next he turned his judgment first on the people of Gaza and then on Tyre, condemning the sinful practices found in both places. The crowd, loving it, grew even larger as Amos continued to appeal to their prejudices about and suspicions of their neighbors.⁴

Then Amos moved to larger targets, with his oratory rising to new heights as he focused on the nation-states surrounding the Northern Kingdom. First it was the Edomites ... Next it was the Amorites turn ... As Amos pronounced his message of doom on these nations, the people gathered around him roaring their approval. When he turned to the very unpopular Moabites the frenzy of the crowd exploded.

Next, Amos with the crowd in the palm of his hand and fully attentive, spoke in a bare whisper: *“Now let me tell you about the sins of the southern Jews,”* he said. These Southern Kingdom Jews were the people with whom the citizens of the Northern Kingdom were the most competitive and with whom they had the deepest rivalry ...

So, to hear their Jewish rivals in the south condemned was music to the ears of the Northern Kingdom people. The crowd pressed closer to this strange messenger, and the number of people listening to him continued to increase dramatically. *Those southern Jews, Amos said, despise the Torah; they do not keep God’s commandments. Their lies cause them to err constantly, but God’s justice is sure, he promised, and so Jerusalem will be devoured by the fire of God.* The crowd was ecstatic with enthusiasm, clapping and cheering. No one budged as this crowd-pleasing evangelist reached his climax.

⁴ Ibid., p. 133

Now, with every ear straining to hear, this herdsman arrived at the conclusion for which he had journeyed from Tekoa to the king's chapel in Bethel. "Now," he said, "let me tell you about the worst people in the world." The crowd could hardly wait to hear who that would be. They were not prepared, however, for what was to come.

"You people of the Northern Kingdom," he said, "are the ultimate culprits in God's world. You are the ones who worship ostentatiously in the sacred shrines, but even as you worship, you sell the righteous for silver and the poor for a pair of shoes. You trample the weak in the dust of the earth ... You worship at every altar in garments stolen from the labor of the poor ... You corrupt holy people, encouraging them to violate their sacred vows. You even silence the prophets."

It was a devastating message. The stunned crowd took a while to recover from shock, so Amos continued to drive home his key insights: *Worship isolated from life is of no value. If worship and justice are ever separated, idolatry is the inevitable result.*

It was a stirring message, but suddenly it was not a popular one.⁵

When the members of the crowd recovered sufficiently to respond, they sent for a priest named Amaziah from the shrine at Bethel and asked him to come to their defense, for they said, "Amos has conspired against you and the land and we are not able to hear his words." Amaziah was the voice of the established religion. He would brook no more of this interference with worship at the king's shrine and so to Amos himself he said: "O seer, go home, flee away to your land in Judah. Prophesy there if you must, but you are never to come again to Bethel, for this is the king's sanctuary. This is the Temple of our nation. Your words are not welcome here." Amos was physically driven from the shrine.

Rejected and defeated Amos returned to his humble life in Tekoa. In this newly imposed exile, he wrote out his prophetic message, and that message became known as the words of Amos the prophet. In time people heard transcendent truth in his words and finally these words were added to the sacred text of the Jewish people and were thus read in worship settings in the Temple, synagogues and holy

⁵ Ibid., p. 134

places. That was when people began to recognize that in the words of Amos, they were beginning to hear the *“Word of the Lord.”*

That is how the message of Amos came to echo through the centuries. In that process, God was inevitably redefined as justice. It was largely through the contribution of Amos that from henceforth in Judaism worship and justice would never again be separated. Worship, rather, came to be viewed as human justice being offered to God, while justice began to be seen simply as divine justice being acted out. In this context justice became another name for God.⁶

Modern-day prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero, and Desmond Tutu received the same ridicule, rejection, and derision as Amos.

Recall that I began this sermon with a story about the explorer, Will Steger. Will, I think, would take great inspiration from our modern-day prophetess, Greta Thunberg, and those who were rallying with her. Last week she called us all to task at the United Nations, saying:

“You are failing us, but young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you, and if you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you.” Greta isn't waiting for more empty promises. She is acting. She tweeted later that day, *“Today at 11:30, I and 15 other children from around the world, filed a legal complaint against 5 nations over the climate crisis through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.”* They hope that this lawsuit forces global leaders to finally act to save our planet.

Every day unlikely heroes and sheroes rise to inspire our courage and call us to action. We live in a culture where people are more offended by ‘swear’ words and middle fingers than they are by famine, warfare and the destruction of our environment. It's time to follow Will, Greta and the millions of others who have been calling us to demand protection for our planet. Many preach about saving the planet; Will and Greta, like Amos, put on their boots and show up in protest to do so. It's making a difference.

⁶ Ibid., p. 135

Friends, (remember!) it was through the work of the prophets primarily that God was redefined in Jewish history. The prophets really do matter, not because they were the predictors of the future (as so many of us were once taught), but because they were able to see more deeply into the meaning of God and into the nature of our humanity. It was the prophets, more than anyone else, who made it possible some eight hundred years later for people to see and to hear the presence of God in the life of the crucified one named Jesus of Nazareth. That, too, resulted in a new understanding of consciousness in which divinity and humanity seem to flow together as one.

You see, the biblical story was never static, nor is the human understanding of God. It is idolatry and an act of faithlessness when anyone thinks that all truth has finally been revealed and that someone or some institution possesses it.