

A Shepherd Gone Mad

Bible Reading:
Amos 1: 1-2; 7: 10-16

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Have you ever noticed how sometimes people arise out of the strangest corners, making a great splash, getting involved in things you never expected, and doing well at it?

The new move, "Rock Star", is milking that theme - an ordinary guy blossoms into a music superstar.

Real life gives examples of that - people from the strangest corners, doing things never expected.

Take Bill Gates, one of the richest men in North America in his early 30's, soft-spoken, bespeckled fellow, coming out of nowhere in high school and starting "Microsoft."

It happens with political figures.

It happens in sports - former journeyman goalie by the name of Lalime blossoms and becomes anchor of the Sens franchise.

When people like this show up, make their splash, and succeed, generally it is a pleasure to watch. It makes for good media fodder and coffee shop talk.

But **sometimes** it can be quite irksome. People show up in unexpected places doing unexpected things, and we **don't** like it. They are a nuisance. What they do rubs us the wrong way; it goes against the grain.

Take Amos - a prophet who came out of nowhere, into a nation that was going along quite smoothly, thank you very much, speaking a message that was quite disturbing, and doing it rather effectively.

The people didn't appreciate him.

The authorities **certainly** were irritated.

Today we begin a series of messages that focus on the book of AMOS, what that unlikely prophet had to say to the culture of his day, and where that message impacts us today.

It would be helpful, as you read the book, to understand conditions in the time of Amos. He prophesied, says the first few verses, during the reigns of King Uzziah and Jeroboam II. This is around 760-750 BC.

It was a time of great prosperity for both kingdoms, as 2Kings 14-15 tell us. Economically, politically, and militarily, things were going well for both Judah and Israel.

However, it was also a time for idolatry, extravagant indulgence in luxurious living, immorality, corruption, and oppression of the poor.

Israel, the chosen people of God, were living high on the hog. They knew it, and they were awfully smug about it. They remembered the prophecies of Elisha some 40-50 years prior, when he has said that Israel would be restored to glory (2Ki13).

Now the glory was here, and the Israelites figured they had it made. God was on their side. They deserved the blessings they got. Nobody, and nothing would ever take it away.

Into that kind of a cesspool of sin and arrogance stepped Amos, one of the shepherds from Tekoa.

Please don't think of him in the same breath as the shepherds of Bethlehem - a lowly bunch of farmhands, rejected and scorned by the population at large.

The word used in ch.1 for "shepherd" is a word also used with reference to the King of Moab in 2Ki 3.4. There it is translated as "raiser of sheep." Amos, like the king of Moab was a sheep dealer, or trader, one with significantly more wealth and resources than a mere shepherd or hired hand.

Amos was a man of means.

That is also made clear from ch.7, where the priest Amaziah chides Amos, "don't try staying here and making money at being a prophet. Go home!" Amos retorts that he has plenty of resources from other means. He's not in it for the cash.

"...I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees."

Now the sycamore-fig would not grow in the area around Tekoa, so it must have been that Amos owned land in another part of the country. It's also interesting that the word used here in ch.7 for shepherd is different from the one in ch.1. It's an obscure one, and seems to refer to the raising of large cattle, not just sheep.

Pull it all together, and it seems that Amos was a diversified, rather wealthy agriculturalist of sorts.

Now it is this man, who knew his sheep and cattle, and who had diversified into fruit-growing, that was called by God and compelled by the Holy Spirit to speak to Israel.

Into a nation with a well-established system and hierarchy of prophets and priests and kings, a nation of wealth and power and terrific self-esteem, wanders this merchant from Judah - an unlikely man with an unlikely message in an unlikely way. That's Amos.

Why does he do it?

Why lay aside a profitable business in animal trading and fruit growing to head north and tear a strip off of people who easily could ruin him economically, or even kill him at the drop of a hat? Let's face it - being a prophet and coming out with guns blazing on God's behalf, as Amos does, is no small matter. It wasn't without considerable risk.

As a sheep trader/dealer, Amos would no doubt have made frequent trips to the various major markets of Palestine, going from Jerusalem to Hebron to Bethel and Samaria. Hence, he was well acquainted with the culture of the day, both within Israel and her surrounding heathen neighbors. The practices and injustices of the day would have been patently obvious to him.

I'm sure it got under his skin.

And then, as Herman Veltkamp remarks, "one day the word of the Lord came to him. Amos heard God speaking to him just as clearly as one might hear a lion roaring in the wilderness of Judah. God had a task for Amos: He was to speak to Israel... He was ordered to bring a message from God as he made his trips to the markets. In God's name he was to protest against the sins of Israel. He was to announce God's judgements."

Amos 7.15: "*The Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophecy to my people Israel.'*"

As had happened before, and would happen again to other men and women in the history of God's people, God's Holy Spirit spoke to Amos' spirit, giving him an unmistakable sense of what God thought of the way things were at the time.

The Holy Spirit gave to Amos' spirit a clear, unshakable message of what would happen if things didn't change quick. It came in the form of thoughts in his mind, compulsions in his heart, and visions he could see.

They were unshakable thoughts, strong compulsions, and vivid visions. Powerful. Like the roar of a lion. And Amos couldn't -- he just **couldn't** -- leave it alone.

If a lion roars, who doesn't shiver in fear?

If God speaks, who can **BUT** go out in obedience & prophecy?

It was a rare thing, mind you. Amos lived in the Old Testament era, where the movement of the Holy Spirit within someone was a rare event. Only a select few were touched by the LORD. Only a select few ever received guidance from him.

Amos lived in the same covenantal age as did Moses, who cried out at one point, "I wish that all the LORD'S people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Num 11.29).

So this unlikely candidate - a farmer, not a seminary student or a son out of a priestly family or someone with a prophetic lineage --

this unlikely candidate heads out with the message of the Lord; a stern message.

The Lion roared through Amos.

Carmel would wither. Carmel, was, by the way, an important mountain in Israel, a place of great fertility - strategic for agriculture, a symbol of the land's well-being.

Their well-being, in other words, would come to a screeching halt.

Their arrogant little empires would be destroyed.

And it was not well received. That is extremely clear from ch.7 and Amaziah's response.

A couple of things got between Amaziah and Amos. The first, no doubt is the message. I mean, who wants to hear negative things said about you and your people. Especially when those things reflect badly on your own work. Amos is condemning the religious life of the people. Amaziah was in charge of caring for that religious life. Of course he'd be upset.

And secondly, who is this businessman to say something to the priest or the king? Who does this shepherd think he is, playing prophet?

Amaziah represented the Israelite establishment, the power-brokers. He was an office-bearer, anointed as priest, representative of the King. If God wanted to speak, let him do it through the proper channels.

Says Amaziah, "Go home. Take your silly games and pronouncements and go back to Judah. Don't dabble in what you don't know anything about."

Responds Amos, "Sorry. When God says 'Go' you don't say 'No.' Oh, and by the way..... You're finished, Amaziah. Your goose is cooked."

Perhaps you hear all this and are getting good and bored by now. "Esoteric, irrelevant" you think. Well, guess again.

Do you realize that what we are talking about is the life, times, and message of a colleague of ours - a **fellow** prophet?

Yes, that's what I said - a **fellow** prophet. Amos, a prophet just as we are prophets.

For that's what we are, isn't it?

I said that Amos lived in the time when the Spirit of God came only occasionally to people, the time when few were prophets.

That has all changed.

The cry of Moses, "I wish that all the LORD'S people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Num 11.29) has been answered.

Pentecost has come. The Holy Spirit has descended on all who are believers in Jesus Christ. As Peter said in Acts 2:

"This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. In the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days and they will prophesy."

We are in **THAT** age -- every believer a prophet.

You and me, too!

Which is something we don't always like to think about. In many ways we are like Amaziah. We like things neat and orderly. If messages of a spiritual nature have to be spoken, let them come in the right way at the right time from the right people. Anything else is somewhat irksome. Or if not irksome, then we shrug it off as irrelevant.

We read scripture that says, "Always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is within you"; and

"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though Christ were making his appeal through us";

and the like, and somehow always manage to discount that.

-I'm no good at it.

-That's the job for elders and the Pastor.

-I don't know anyone I could speak to.

Or we hear other people proclaim the word of God and perhaps we think somewhere in the back of our mind,

"Who do they think **they** are, anyway? Not an officebearer. Not got proper training. Didn't get proper authorization first"

-- words that carry echos of Amaziah's words, "Who does this sheep-herder think **he** is, anyway?"

How is it for us, brothers and sisters? Do we stand more with Amos, or Amaziah? Are we ready to take up the prophetic mantel, to accept the fact that being a Christian in the New Testament age means to have the Holy Spirit, and to have the Holy Spirit means that we are prophets, and that we are prophets means we must speak

or have we got a million excuses or criticisms ready to bypass the task?

How much prophetic talk does our society hear from the Church of Jesus Christ today?

How much prophetic talk do our neighbours hear from us today?

We are in a day and age that is relatively complacent and comfortable. In the midst of that comfort people are wandering in all manner of spiritual directions, wandering in darkness away from a relationship with the one living God through his son Jesus Christ. The end result of those wanderings is certain - death.

Though they may not hear it themselves, the Word of God roars like a lion, searing the top of Carmel. Their future, perhaps in this life, and certainly in eternity, is barren, dry, a wilderness.

That word has been given to us. The word of life about the one called "The Lion of Judah."

The Spirit has been given to us.

So as Amos retorts to Amaziah: How can we **BUT** prophecy?

It will not be easy. The reaction we will receive will often be similar to Amaziah's reactions to Amos' message.

We'll have people telling us, as Amaziah did to Amos, to keep our opinions to ourselves. It is the voice which proclaims loudly throughout our country - "Keep your religious beliefs quiet, and certainly out of the public arena. There is no room in education for religious statements or dogma. There is no room in politics for spiritual ultimatums. There is no room in area of labour relations for questions of faith, for creeds."

"If it works for you - fine. Just keep it there.... with you. Don't start preaching it loudly. That's arrogant!"

People may even shake their heads and consider us crazy. "She's gone mad," they may say. But hey, that puts us in good company. They also said that the shepherd had gone mad.

And so the question for you and I, as we stand in the tradition of Amos, is:

To who's drumbeat will we march?

Who's call will we heed?

With whom will we side?

For whom will we speak?

Oh, it may seem strange. It may, at first, feel terribly awkward. It may seem totally out of place. But then, it wasn't much different for Amos. And the God who called him, who spoke through him, and who cared for him in that entire process is the same living Creator God who calls us, speaks through us, and who promises to care for us as we walk into a new week as prophets of His, speaking his word in this age.