

The juxtaposition of Amos and Jesus in today's scriptures may seem strange. They lived 900 years apart: Amos in the reign of King Jeroboam; Jesus in the time of Roman occupation. Amos is an Old Testament prophet, who talks little of God's blessings and love. He mostly proclaimed sharp judgment upon God's people. Jesus, the Son of God, is our savior. We understand his message as "Good News". He focuses a lot on God's love as he seeks repentance. Yet, Jesus does have moments where he cleanses the temple and talks about divine judgement upon those who ignore God's teachings and harm others. Amos and Jesus make for an interesting comparison. Amos is a farmworker from the south that becomes a carpetbagger in the north and preaches at Bethel, Israel's national cathedral. Jesus is a carpenter's son from Galilee who goes south to the national capital, Jerusalem, and preaches in the Temple.

However, they have more in common than we may think. Amos is called by God from his work and told to "Prophecy to my people Israel". Jesus is chosen by God anointed according to the words of Isaiah "to bring good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, giving sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed." (Isaiah 61:1-2) Amos preaches against the greed that sells the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals (2:6) They are both prophets. Prophets are those who are called and commissioned by God and deliver the Word of God to the people. Prophets speak God's truth which disturbs the people and incurs the wrath of those with power. Prophets are not loved. They are run out of town like Amos. They are put in a pit like Jeremiah. (Jeremiah 37:15-16) They are beheaded like John the Baptist. They are taken out of the city and hung on a cross. They often are found writing letters from jails. They are often martyrs to the truth.

We can miss the prophet in the narrative of Jesus' return home to Nazareth. The report of his deeds and teaching was spreading throughout the area. He was praised by everyone. When he came home to Nazareth, the whole town was excited. Here was the hometown boy who was someone special. They ran to the synagogue to hear him. They came sick and brought others who needed to be healed, expecting great things. Certainly, he would do in his hometown what he did in Capernaum. They were ready to put up a sign at the edge of town that said, "Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus!" They hoped for a boost in the economy, maybe a shrine like Lourdes. At first, they all spoke well of him which people tend to do if you are saying what they want to hear and doing what you want them to do.

But the visit goes south. He disappoints. He claims God has anointed him, a Messianic claim, pushing reality as they saw it. They have known him from his infancy. They know his family. Some begin to question – "Isn't he just Joseph's son? Jesus does not do what they want; he does not do the things he has done in that rival town of Capernaum. The hint is in the proverb that Jesus quotes: "No prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown." Adding fuel to the fire, Jesus reminds them of Elijah and Elisha whom God involved in ministry to the Gentiles. When Jesus widens the scope of God's love and his ministry to include Gentiles, the people feel betrayal and judgment on them. They become a mob and drag him to the hill overlooking the

town with the intent to throw him to his death...foreshadowing what will happen too soon in Jerusalem.

The truth about prophets is that they speak the truth. They tell us what God sees. They do not tell us how wonderful we are, which is what we want to hear. They do not tickle our fancy and tell us all will be well. They point out what is wrong. They cry out for change – in individual morality and societal justice. They cannot see the future; they are not fortune tellers. But they do clearly see the present and expose where it is leading. The biblical prophets are remembered because what they feared came true. They were right while the false prophets who were many, spoke the party line crying “Peace, peace when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11) playing to the king and the crowd. Writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul said, “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but, having itchy ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.” (II Timothy 4:3) The prophet Jeremiah declared, “The Lord said to me: the prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I commission them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own mind.” (14:14). Matthew quotes Jesus, “Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (7:15)

God always has prophets to speak to his people. God always wants to save his people – each individual and every nation. In every age, in our time, there are truth tellers and false prophets. What is important is discerning between who is speaking for God and who is speaking a lying vision, deceiving those who listen. The true prophet is not just one who quotes scripture – even the devil can use scripture to his advantage. Beware those who champion the way it was, the good old days and promise us that we are the chosen and deserve the favored place. Rather, listen to those who sound and live like Jesus, who are concerned for doing what is right and good and live it themselves, who are less concerned for themselves and focused on the poor, the needy, and the oppressed, seeking justice for all and striving to give life abundant to others. Prophets do not speak to “them” – they speak to us. Are we listening? Are we willing to do what God wants in our lives and in our society?

We live in a time of many voices. We live in a time when people lie and deceive to achieve their ends at any cost. We live in a time when people promote absolute freedom rather than living under the rule of God or bound by others’ rights and needs. We live in a time where, for many, the bottom line is all that counts. We live in a time when judgement of others is proclaimed out of self-righteousness. We live in a time when fear for ourselves and our lifestyle motivates more than God’s will. It is times such as these that we, the people, need to read and heed the history of I and II Kings and the preaching of the Old Testament prophets. In this time we need to hear Jesus, the prophet, declaring what God wants not just in spiritual realms but in real lives and the real world. To ignore the true prophets, past and present, is still to hurry down the path toward destruction. It is a time to listen critically rather than follow blindly. It is a time to seek the prophets’ voice. It is a time to seek God’s will for his world and advocate for it. It is to this purpose that God has chosen us, named us his children and called us to follow Christ.