

THE VOCATION OF A PROPHET

10 Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: “Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. 11 For this is what Amos is saying: ““Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.””

12 Then Amaziah said to Amos, “Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. 13 Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.”

14 Amos answered Amaziah, “I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. 15 But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ 16 Now then, hear the word of the LORD.

After Solomon died, Israel was split into two kingdoms, north and south. South was Judah, mostly faithful, continuing to worship as God commanded at the one temple in Jerusalem. In the north, things were different. There were two kings named Jeroboam, many years separated. But the sins of the first Jeroboam affected the second and everybody else in the north. The first Jeroboam didn’t want his people going down south to worship and to give their offerings and money. So he built his own shrines. One of these was way up north; the other was not far from Jerusalem on the border of the two countries. His people could go to either shrine. But when they did, they were only bringing down God’s wrath. God said to them: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I can’t stand your assemblies” (Am. 5:21).

Our passage is about a priest from one of those shrines confronting the Godly prophet, Amos. This pagan priest accused Amos of conspiracy! “He’s preaching against our country with his words from the Lord!” he said. “He’s threatening your very life, O King,” he said. And this later king in the days of Amos was the other Jeroboam. He was no better than the first one, and maybe in some ways he was worse.

Now, Amos had proclaimed God’s word against this Israelite king who had forsaken God. But in the north, the temples belonged to the king himself, so saying anything about the false religion was seen as rebellion against the king. It would have been easy from Amos to say, “Okay, I’ve said my piece, and now I’ll go somewhere else.” But he was also accused of prophesying for bread, that is, for his daily income.

Amos didn't need the income of a prophet to feed himself. He was already a shepherd who also did side jobs to supplement his income. It was God's idea, and God's idea alone, that took Amos away from his flocks and the shade of the fig trees where they grazed. Amos stands his grounds and stands by the message God gave him to speak. He says: "The Lord said, 'Go prophesy,' and so listen to the word of the Lord."

In fact, Amos insists that he wasn't a prophet at all, except that the Lord called him. He says, "I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet." By that, he means that is not trained as a prophet. "The sons of the prophets" is a term we hear in the book of Kings for students who were trained by prophets in a "school of the prophets." I think that this school may have looked more like a Greek philosopher's school than a modern college, with young men following a prophet as he traveled and learning from him. This seems to have gotten its start with Samuel, but since we can't say very much for certain about it, let's apply it to our time rather than speculate about details we just don't have.

Training as a prophet in the Old Testament did not make a man a prophet, any more than training for ministry today makes anyone into a called minister. It is not a feeling in the individual that makes him a pastor, minister, teacher, professor. It is the divine call. A divine call comes externally from the Holy Spirit. To say, "I feel that I am called" is not the same as being given a divine call. In ancient times, God called his prophets directly, with his own voice often accompanied by a miracle, such as when Moses saw the burning bush, or Isaiah saw the Seraphim. Amos was spoken to in some way by God, perhaps while he was tending his sheep or the fig trees nearby.

Today, as in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, God calls through congregations, through churches. So even though one man might have a great desire to serve, and another man may be reluctant to serve and even question his fitness, the call comes to one of them on account of God's desire, not man's. So in our time, we who have a very different kind of school for our workers than Amos knew about, there are three steps that are especially necessary for a person to become a called worker. First: They are trained, especially in the word of God and in Christian doctrine, so that their teaching and preaching will be in line with all of God's word. Second, they offer themselves as candidates for a call. Sometimes someone will go part or most of the way through training and then step back, saying, "This isn't for me." I had more than one classmate who took this route, but who serve their congregations today as very effective and well-informed lay leaders. Finally, they receive and accept an actual call, which can come from a church, a school, or a special ministry of our Synod as a missionary or administrator or in some other capacity.

So: For the student, there is only (1) training, and (2) offering themselves as candidates. That's as far as any individual can go. The call comes from outside, from church or school, and the call is what makes one a pastor, a teacher, or a staff minister. The burning desire to serve that many have, isn't really a part of any of these steps, except that it hopefully leads a student to seek out training. This coming school year, out of all the 13 or 14 hundred churches in our synod, 21 students at Martin Luther College will be from this congregation. That's almost 4% of MLC's entire student body. We can rejoice over that number. But our synod still needs more. We need students in High School to consider preaching or teaching ministry, and we need older folks to consider—as I did—the second-career route into ministry.

But for Amos, ministry at this moment meant the serious call to repentance. This priest of Bethel was in effect saying, “Don't tell us we're sinning. Don't accuse the king of doing anything wrong in his own church.”

How many times don't we come close to saying, “Don't tell me I'm sinning. I've been thinking this way, talking this way, acting this way, all my life. Who are you to say that it's a sin?” But the Holy Spirit holds up the law of God's Commandments and he asks: Do you measure up? Do you make your own opinion into a god? Do you get reckless with God's holy name, or get lazy with his holy word? Do you love everyone in the world, everyone in your life, do love everyone you see in the news, as much as you love yourself?

And so we turn to the Lord in repentance and its two parts. First, there is fear of God's punishment for our sin. The law shows our sins, and the law demands: “Pay to God what you owe,” but that price is too high, it's eternal damnation, and we tremble. The more we consider the law and our sins, the more frightened we become. But then the Gospel comes, the Gospel which demands nothing from us at all. The Gospel says, “You're forgiven.”

Christ suffered and rose from the dead to take away the burden of our sin and our guilt and shame. And this message of repentance and of forgiveness is what God wants to be preached to all nations in his name (Luke 24). And so we pray every time we say the Lord's Prayer: “Forgive us our sins.”

Hearing the Gospel, receiving forgiveness from God, is such a marvelous message. Being a prophet, or pastor, is not the highest calling for a Christian. Being a Christian is. In whatever you do, beginning here, now, today, while you serve God as a student, a mom, a dad, a soldier, a shopkeeper, a farmer, a nurse-- whatever path God has laid out for you, do everything to his glory, as his forgiven child. Amen.