

An obnoxious prophet

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Amos is a difficult prophet to preach because he is so little interested in the possibility that the fate of the people may improve if they return to God. Yet the encounter between the prophet and Amaziah the priest in today's lesson is thrilling, even cinematic.

Amos is from the South but is preaching in the North, prophesying the destruction of the Northern Kingdom. Amaziah, ministering at the royal sanctuary in Bethel, goes to the king and tells him that the prophet is conspiring against the kingdom. It's not clear whether Amaziah's misunderstanding of the oracle is innocent or malicious. In any case, Amaziah urges Amos to go back home, where he will be safe, and to make his living as a prophet there.

*It sounds to me like part advice, part threat. *If you know what's good for you, you'll be a professional, be realistic, be smart, and get out of town.**

Amos's reply is classic:

I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

Amos is not a professional oracle, not a member of the prophets' guild, not liable to the blandishments of money or safety or even good sense. Amaziah has badly misjudged this outsider, and as a result the prophet curses him brutally.

This little biographical moment reveals something about what a prophet really is. For all our modern emphasis on “prophetic” preaching and witness, being a prophet wasn’t a dimension of Amos’s public life. It wasn’t a mode he adopted for the preaching of justice. It was a calling that thrust him into a suspicious, even hostile environment—without any hope of changing the world for the better. It required him not to be a safe and responsible steward of public welfare, but rather to be difficult, obnoxious and unrealistic.

In our own age, Amos would not be the sort of person I’m inclined to admire.

It’s important to keep this in mind as we approach this text and others like it. If I’m honest with myself, I’m likelier to identify with Amaziah’s sail-trimming than with Amos’s defiance. Preaching this text requires us to enter the drama of that story—up to and including its ugly, vindictive conclusion—with honesty about what it meant and still means to speak for a righteous God in a heedless world.