

Meditation for Alex Miller's Baptism

Amos 7:7-15

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⁷This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; ⁹the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

¹⁰Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" ¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" (NRSV)

I

It's hard to imagine being a prophet. Most of us don't think of ourselves as prophets. Instead we think of ourselves as teachers, students, administrators, health care workers, social workers, or something else. Not prophets. In order to be a prophet, you have to be a special, extraordinary, even holy person, and most of us don't think of ourselves in those terms. We're just ordinary people, often unsure of ourselves, and certainly not very holy. In our own estimation, we are not good candidates for the vocation of the prophet. We're perfectly willing to live as Christians to the best of our ability, but please, O Lord, please do not ask us to be prophets. Prophets have a hard life. They often get into conflicts with other people. And they tend to get killed before their time.

II

However, Alex, there is one part of being a prophet that you might be able to understand: the part about needing to speak someone else's words. A prophet generally does not speak his or her own words, but the words God prompts him or

her to speak. Now when Amos sat down to write the words that make up the book of Amos, I doubt that God dictated every single word and made Amos write them down just so on parchment. Instead I assume Amos worked by inspiration. That is, the Holy Spirit worked through Amos' thoughts, feelings, intuitions, and bodily sensations. The Holy Spirit helped Amos come up with the general ideas, and then allowed Amos to edit those ideas with whatever words Amos chose to use. Still, the ideas, and at least some of the words, weren't Amos'. They were God's ideas, and often, God's words.

As an actor, Alex, you know how this works. You are given a script that someone else wrote. Then you are expected to memorize those words and live into them so thoroughly that they become your own words. When you get on a stage, you are expected to identify so closely with your character and his words that in essence you become that person. And if you're doing improvisation, you have to identify so intimately with your character that you can find your own words in the moment, on the fly.

This is more or less what a prophet does. He or she identifies so closely with God, and has such an intimate relationship with God, that he or she is able to speak God's words with integrity, conviction, and a certain amount of authority.

In ancient Israel, prophets were often mouthpieces for God's justice, for *mishpat*, in the Hebrew. When it came to God's justice, Amos had a reputation for blunt speech. Elsewhere in the book he lambasts the evils of war, killing pregnant women, selling people into slavery, and trampling the head of the poor. For Amos, the Lord God was not like a meek little lamb. No, the Lord God was like an angry lion breathing fire and fury (1:12) at all the injustice of the world.

Alex, I do not know if God will ever call you to become a prophet. Perhaps, perhaps not. Who can say? Yet today I think we can say three things to you about this.

First, if God calls you to be a prophet, we can predict that you will know how to communicate whatever it is that God wants you to say. As an actor, you are accustomed to this. You have practice in taking the words of another and embracing them so deeply into your being that you can speak them to others with confidence, feeling, and poise. As with human words, so with divine words. If God nudges you into prophecy, you can bring your acting experience with you into the role.

Second, I think we can say to you today--with confidence—that from now on, your life is not your own. This is true whether you become a prophet or not. Today you are handing your life over to Jesus Christ. Until now, you have largely lived your life as if it belonged to you—and in a real sense, it did belong to you. But baptism is an outward sign of an inward decision to offer your life to Christ. When you give someone a birthday gift or a Christmas gift, you don't expect it back again. From now on, it's theirs. That is what we do in baptism. We give Christ the gift of our lives and acknowledge that from this point forward, Christ is our primary authority.

You can see an example of this in our text today. Amos had been a shepherd, and from all we can gather from the story, he had been a contented shepherd, glad to remain a shepherd for the rest of his life. But it was not to be so. Instead God called him to the difficult and demanding task of traveling to a neighboring country and speaking the words God gave him to speak. When he arrived, Amaziah, a court prophet who received his salary from the king, tells Amos to shut up and go back home. As you know, Amos refuses. Hey, this isn't a job I asked for, he fires back at Amaziah. I didn't aspire to be a prophet. I would have ducked this if God had let me. But God wanted me to do it. So I came. I'm just the messenger; and if you don't

like it, then talk to God about it, not me. Amos discovered that as a man committed to God, his life was not his own. His life belonged to God.

The third thing we can say today with certainty is that God will be with you, Alex. That doesn't mean you're going to have an easy life. In fact, for all any of us knows, it might be a very difficult life. Some of us sitting here today know what it's like to live a hard life. Some of us here have learned what can happen to us after we hand our life over to Christ. Being a follower of Christ can be downright tough. But we can testify to you that the Triune God will be with you, because God has been with us.

Alex, may God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, be with you all your days.
Amen.