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Amos 7:7-17

The Prophet Amos

People are angry about the new Ariel. Have you heard about this? Disney is making a live action remake of *The Little Mermaid* and last week they announced who would play the title role. The actress who will be the little mermaid is ... black—and that is making people angry. That makes me angry. Mermaids must be Caucasian? She's a fish, not a race. Actually, that whole fairy tale makes me angry. The music from the movie is great, but the premise? Could the metaphor be more maddening? Ariel is a princess of the ocean, she's able to swim wherever she wants, explore undiscovered depths, and she can sing—how she can sing—and she trades her voice... Think about the significance of that metaphor—which is actually not a metaphor—she literally trades her voice for a chance to make a lunk on land fall in love with her?

I was also angry, recently, after reading an article—this article wasn't a fairy tale, it was about income inequality in America. This was not the first time I had heard about the widening gap between rich and poor, you've probably heard about this, too, but statistics in this particular article really stood out to me. It noted how from 1979 to 2017 the purchasing power of the average American's paycheck did not increase, while the average real annual wages of the top 1 percent of Americans rose 156 percent. And the top .01 percent's wages? They rose by 343 percent. Average hourly wages for recent college graduates have barely budged since 2000, while the bottom 60 percent of college graduates earn less than that group did in 2000. Nearly all of the benefits of recent economic growth have gone to large corporations and their shareholders. All of this can make one angry.

Or what about that New Jersey court case that was in the news last week? A young man of privilege videotaped a crime he committed against an intoxicated 16 year old girl. He then sent the video to his friends, along with a callous, brutal message about the girl. When all of this was presented in court the judge dismissed it, gave the perpetrator a light sentence with this explanation: he goes to "an excellent school" and comes from "a good family," and a harsh punishment would have a "harmful impact on his future." What kind of judgements are given to young men who go terrible schools and have horrible home lives? And what about the victim? What does this judgement say to her? And what about its impact on her future? What does this story, which is sickening, and sickeningly not the first of its kind, say about how we treat girls and women and the court system and justice? Do I even need to mention Jeffrey Epstein?

This a heavy first half of a sermon, I know, and I didn't really relish the thought of standing before you on a summer Sunday morning and talking about anger-inducing current events. I didn't want to do that, but the prophet we are focusing on this week is Amos, and that's what Amos does. Amos, like us perhaps, lived in a time of relative prosperity but increasing inequality, callous behavior, and wrenching injustice, especially for those on the margins. Amos lived in a time of superficial calm but social decay, and Amos would not keep silent. Amos could have been the one who coined the phrase: "If you're not angry, you're not paying attention." Amos repeatedly, relentlessly, points out all the horrible things people do, ways people are hurtful, hateful, to their fellow human beings, and Amos announces there is wrath to come. All of which is to say, Amos isn't easy listening. As one Biblical commentator says, "If you like Amos, you don't get him."

Amos isn't easy to like. I don't think Amos cares if we don't like him. Amos didn't care that people of his own time didn't like him, we see that in the reading today. The priest Amaziah went to see Amos, to tell him to tone it down a little. Or at the very least, don't say such things in the sanctuary, in the temple, of all places, don't prophesy there. And Amos replies, "I'm no prophet." (Don't tell Amos about the sermon title.) "I'm no prophet," Amos says, in one of the more famous lines from this prophetic book: "I'm 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.'" And so Amos did. Amos, who said he was no prophet, went to prophesy. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. Pretty much all of the prophets of the Old Testament are like this. I can't think of a single one who says, "Oooh, that's what I want to do, go and be prophetic!" Biblical prophets all display a high level of reluctance, even resistance to God's call. They don't want to be prophets, but God says to them, "Hey, you! You whom I have called by name—are you paying attention?!"

Prophets pay attention, and it makes them angry. Even more than that, prophets—people who feel prophetic anger—do not just notice injustice. Anybody can do that. Current examples abound. Anybody can complain about the state of the world, the wide gap between how it is and what God wants for it, for us. People who are prophetic don't just notice injustice, they do something: they go to the centers of power, to talk with people in charge. They go across the road, to help someone who needs it.

Like in today's gospel parable. There is someone who needs help here, and injustice, too. That traveler on the roadside was a victim of a terrible crime: callously, brutally attacked. But that traveler was victimized not just once, but again and then again—victimized first by violence, and then by indifference, as privileged, so called religious people of the time saw what had happened but did nothing. And then a very unlikeable person, a Samaritan—to the first hearers of this story, calling Samaritans unlikeable is an understatement—then a Samaritan arrived. The Samaritan must have felt a mix of emotions as he saw this traveler needing help, this representative of a group of people with who have not treated his people kindly. The Samaritan may have felt reluctance, resistance. But also pity. And not just pity, alarm, incredulity, and anger. The Samaritan must have also felt anger, seeing this person lying there, a victim of a brutal attack. The Samaritan must have felt anger seeing the fresh footprints of people who just passed on by. The Samaritan may not have wanted to, but they did what they did, they did what they were called to do, because they lived according to a plumb line.

Do you know what a plumb line is? That image from the first reading, the plumb line that God shows to Amos? I didn't really know what a plumb line was so I looked it up, and will up and will now explain it to you so you don't have to Google during church. A plumb line is a string with a weight attached to the bottom. You hold the string and you drop the weight and you have a straight line, a sure line, from up on high to the center of gravity, a pure and trustworthy way to measure. We have a plumb line from heaven, and it centers us, this plumb line from God about how to measure our lives: love your neighbor as yourself.