
What Will Return?

Amos 1 and 2

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 6, 2021 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

I don't know about you, but sometimes I really enjoy it when the bad guy in the story finally gets what's coming to him. Perhaps there are times when you'd just call it relief—I'm relieved that the person causing destruction won't be doing that anymore. Yet there are surely times where it's not just about stopping the harm but it's about justice being served. Let me give you an example (and let's be honest, there are a million). In the classic Disney movie, *Aladdin*, Jafar is a power hungry, self-absorbed, villain. The movie begins with Jafar using whatever poor soul he can to get the magic lamp that will give him the power he desires. He disposes of one man in an effort to get the lamp, and then he sends Aladdin into the Cave of Wonders to get it for him. When Aladdin is about to narrowly escape death and is only needing Jafar's hand to save him, Jafar takes the lamp from Aladdin and then kicks him to what should have been his death. As the movie continues, Jafar manipulates and tortures the Sultan, tries to kill Aladdin multiple times, attempts to forcibly marry Jasmine and then almost kills her. His evil quest for power is relentless. By the end of the movie, it is clearly time for him to go. So when Jafar is fooled into becoming a genie and is permanently trapped in a lamp, there is something that is just and right about it.

Perhaps for some, it is this sense of telling the bad folks they'll get what they deserve that makes the role of a prophet palatable for them. Being able to call out injustice and declare that wrongs done to others won't go unaddressed can be deeply satisfying. Just like the resolution of countless villain movies, it's good to speak of a future where justice wins and good triumphs. It doesn't seem like too bad of a gig to be the one who sees that change is coming, that those doing harm will not continue. This is some of what a prophet is called to do.

Of course, the role of prophets in scripture is manifold. Some prophets read signs in the present to offer insight or wisdom for the future. Some become the mouthpiece to speak a message from the Lord. Some serve as miracle workers and some as interpreters of dreams. Sometimes prophets speak to current needs, and sometimes they emphasize future events. Sometimes prophets primarily address religious fidelity, and sometimes their proclamation is primarily about social responsibilities and injustices. Sometimes prophets highlight God's justice, and sometimes they focus on God's mercy.¹ Depending on what the particular calling is, there is reason to be more or less inclined to want to be a prophet.

Even for those whose righteous indignation overflows at the wrongs they see in the world or who feel particularly inclined to speak on behalf of God, being a prophet is full of risk, and often without much reward. Perhaps, then, it's not surprising that many of the biblical prophets are reluctant in their acceptance of the role. Maybe it's because like Jesus said, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." There's often a social, if not a physical, price to pay for being a person who speaks as prophets do, especially to their own community. Not too many people get excited about a calling that will make them unpopular with friends and enemies alike. Perhaps the advice I received before entering the ministry is true also for those called to be prophets: "If you can do anything else, do it." "If you are able not to be a prophet, don't be one"

¹ Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 326-7.

So when the word of the Lord comes in visions to Amos in the early years of the 8th Century BCE, it is no surprise that he is careful to identify himself as a shepherd. Amos is not some fire and brimstone preacher by trade. No, he's simply someone who is doing his everyday work right alongside his colleagues. He is a line cook preparing a meal with the other chefs in the kitchen. He is a housekeeper working as part of the team who ensures the building is ready for use. He is an accountant in a cubicle evaluating the spending patterns of colleagues. He's a social worker processing cases for people to receive the aid they need. All of this is to say, he's an ordinary person who has the extraordinary responsibility of seeing God's word and proclaiming it to others. And the message he receives from the Lord comes as a roar of a lion and as the thunder from the heavens that causes even the vegetation to wither and the top of the mountain to dry up. Amos does not see a pleasant word from the Lord, yet he proclaims what he sees.

The beginning of Amos's prophetic words are words of judgment to nearby nations. These nations are guilty of a variety of violent and troubling acts against their neighbors. These nations have repeatedly harmed and done wrong to peoples from other nations. Like letting Jafar know that he's going to get what's coming, telling these nations of their impending judgment from the Lord seems like the better part of being called to speak prophetically. Damascus and Gaza and Tyre and Edom, the Ammonites and Moab, all of these have repeatedly destroyed the lives of others through various transgressions. These wrongdoings range from destroying the crops of those they've warred against to thrusting multiple communities into exile to snatching the babies from pregnant women's wombs. "For three transgressions, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment." Amos repeats this refrain to each of these peoples. By this he is saying, "You've done this harm over and over and over, and it's going to stop."

The NRSV translates one part of Amos's repeated phrase as "I will not revoke my punishment." A literal translation of the phrase is, "I will not cause it to return." While the "it" that will return is somewhat ambiguous, the thrust of the message is, "the repeated harm you've done is going to come back to you." Your death dealing ways won't go one forever without it finally impacting you, too.

I want to pause here to notice something about what Amos's prophetic proclamations to the nations say about God. While there is surely judgment in Amos's words, we also should hear the mercy in them. The mercy is for the offenders and the offended. On the one hand, God has not rained down punishment on the nations for one wrongdoing or one transgression against their neighbors. God is merciful and slow to anger, even when it comes to God's interactions with nations and peoples who've done harm. Perhaps time and again God has refrained from punishment or has made God's own roaring judgment return rather than visit upon those who've perpetuated evil. And yet, there is also a great mercy in knowing that those who harm their neighbors won't be able to continue unchecked forever. Eventually, God will intervene. This is surely a word of warning for any who perpetuate evil. It's also a word of hope for those repeatedly harmed. God is patient. Yet God is not some distant deity who set the world in motion and now is removed from the realities of the world. Eventually the foot of the oppressor will be removed from peoples' necks.

We can almost hear the "amens" from God's people as they listen to Amos calling out the injustices and wrongs of the surrounding nations. Not that they are eager to be called prophets, but perhaps this is the part of speaking prophetically that they want to join. Maybe it's the part we want to join, too. I don't know how it is for you, but sometimes it feels righteous and just to look around

at the harm done by peoples and nations near and far and call them out for their great atrocities—and say this won't last forever. We call to account nations or peoples who have a history of doing dreadful harm to those who stand in their way. We can name despots and dictators who even destroy their own people to maintain power and control. We readily call out other societies known for sex trafficking, or social control through government propaganda, or debt bondage that leaves people perpetually enslaved unable to pay off what they owe. We are ready to speak against children being forced to be soldiers, the genocides of people groups, and religiously motivated extremism that puts everyone at risk. “For three transgressions, and for four,” we say, “God will not let it return.” The harm sown will reap destruction. If Amos were naming modern peoples and nations and speaking a word of judgment from the Lord on them, we would have no problem saying “amen.”

Perhaps if this is what prophets do, we're ready to dawn the mantle. Maybe we are ready to speak prophetically against the injustices that fly in the face of God's concern for all people. Perhaps we're even called to it—called to speak truth to power, to name when things are wrong, to call out the evils and injustices we see. Maybe we've seen God's voice roaring against the evils that destroy people, and we feel called and motivated to give voice to God's voice. And while God may not be calling people any longer to be prophets in the manor of Amos, we very well may be called to speak against the harming of neighbors and peoples—to give voice to the fact that eventually God's justice will come so that those who harm, no matter how powerful they seem, won't be able to do so forever.

The truth is, often the church has been known for taking up the mantle of prophetic speech. Now depending on the tradition of a particular church, different things are the focus—which evil is addressed or which social injustice called out, depends on which church you pay attention to the most. Regardless of the issue, the church broadly has often been known for giving voice to God's judgment on the perceived wrongdoings of the world around. This is for better and for worse. For the better, the church has taken up the causes of the vulnerable and the violated in a broad range of settings and across a wide range of issues. For the worse, the church has been known for being judgmental—often we've been known more for what we're against than what we're for. Our eagerness to say “amen” to prophetic judgment against all those around us has at times damaged our witness to the God, who even in judgment, demonstrates a wideness in mercy.

But here's the thing about the first two chapters of Amos: they are intended to get those listening to nod their heads in agreement that God is righteous and just in punishing the nations for their evil works. They are intended to make God's people ready for those who perpetuate evil to fall. Because as God's people nod in agreement and point their fingers with prophetic indignation, the word of God turns to address them. With the same refrain as the other nations, God calls out Judah and Israel—God's chosen people—for their own transgressions. Do you know what is more challenging than being the prophet? Being the one prophesied against. And the amens of God's people turn to rebuttals, excuses, and silencing tactics and eventually to a rejection of the prophet all together—the people tell Amos to leave them and go share his message somewhere else.

The justice God demanded of the nations, God also demands from God's people. When God's people pursue extravagant and luxurious living at the cost of the vulnerable; when God's people use and abuse the powerless for their own material or political gain; when God's people sell out the righteous and the needy in order to have more and more and more; when God's people take advantage of the poor, the afflicted, and the marginalize; God's people will be held to account

as well. You see the wideness in God's mercy extends all the way to the margins, to the borders of who we think is deserving and beyond. And this mercy means that God won't allow the harm done to continue unaddressed. When injustice is sown, the justice returned will not be pleasant because it will demand an uprooting and replanting. God will not stop the harm from returning upon those who've perpetually harmed for the sake of the vulnerable and the violated and those who've had wrongs done against them. And if anyone should know this, it is God's people who have witnessed God act on their behalf time and again whether they were enslaved in Egypt and under the hand of another mighty oppressor.

While we are not the people of Israel, in Christ we are God's adopted people. And though we the church may be known for our prophetic judgment against the troubling ways of the world around us, this text from Amos calls us to humility. It reminds us that even as we point a finger in prophetic pronouncements against the injustices we see, we have fingers pointing right back at us reminding us of our own wrongdoings, transgressions, and complicity in the injustices all around. As eager as we may be to see the wrongdoers fall, we must remember that so often we are the ones doing wrong. So often we are bound up, even complicit in, the historical atrocities of our own people. We are too often perpetrators of systems of injustice and harm that leave destruction in their wake. Too often, we are the ones who pillage creation for our own convenience and comfort, who profit on the backs of the poor, and maintain power by exclusion. For three transgressions of Christians in America, in Durham, at Duke Chapel, in the pulpit and for four... You see, God's mercy will not allow us to keep harming others and ourselves forever. So even as we nod in affirmation of God's justice, in humility we must ask, what should return on us? What will return?

I pray that the Lord will help us to see the word that comes in mercy and judgment and respond rightly to it. In humility and repentance, may we follow the guidance that Amos gives a few chapters later, so that what will return is the fruit of the good, the life, and the love we've sown. Amos says, "Seek good, and not evil, that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of hosts will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious." Amen.