

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: A Herdsman and A Dresser of Sycamore Trees
Reverend Dr. Alan Baughcum
St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio
July 14, 2024

Amos 7:7-15, Mark 6:14-29

A learned preacher once taught me that I should be able to do two things with every sermon that I give. First, I should be able to tell the congregation what the sermon was about in a single sentence. Second, I should be able to tell the congregation what they should do with the message of my sermon, again in one sentence.

So, in case any of you doze off in the next few minutes, this sermon asserts that every follower of God, each one of us, has a call from God, a job to do. Second, when we figure out what our call is, we need to follow through on what God wants us to do ... faithfully and boldly!

The Old Testament is full of prophets called by God to speak for God. Often those prophets were called at a young age, and they seem to have been, well, a little odd. Similarly, our New Testament reading from the Gospel according to Mark was about the very odd prophet, John the Baptizer ... eater of locusts and wearer of camel hides.

But I am going to tell you this morning about a prophet called by God who was full grown and wealthy and successful. There was no obvious way in which he was odd or eccentric. That prophet was Amos, a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.

And therefore, I make the claim: young/old, poor/wealthy, odd/ordinary ... it doesn't matter. God has a call, a job, for each of us to do.

The prophet Amos was called to his mission during the first half of the eighth century B. C. Amos lived in Judah, the southern half of the Kingdom that had been ruled by King David and then by King Solomon. That Kingdom split into two parts, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The Judah of Amos' time would be what Israelis call Israel today while Palestinians and others call it the West Bank.

God spoke to Amos and told him to leave Judah and go into the northern kingdom, Israel, and tell the people of Israel that God was unhappy, very unhappy, with their behavior. In fact, Amos was directed to go into Israel and tell the people there that God was so unhappy with Israel that God was going to bring enemies to destroy Israel.

We know from the very first verse of Amos that he was "among the shepherds of Tekoa." Tekoa was a small town in northern Judah — in the mountains about 20 miles southwest of the Jordan River and about ten miles west of the Dead Sea. Amos' flocks would probably have included goats as well as sheep. And Verse 17 of chapter 7 tells us that Amos was also a herdsman, referring to herding cattle.

Alan Baughcum

As for his being a shepherd, the Hebrew word for shepherd which Amos employs is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only once. In that one other instance “shepherd” refers to the owner of substantial flocks of sheep.

Amos also tells us in verse 14 of chapter 7 that he was a “dresser of sycamore trees,” here using a Hebrew word used nowhere else in the Bible. Amos’ sycamore trees were not the sycamore trees that we know in the U. S. Our sycamore trees are tall plane — p-l-a-n-e — trees that grow their seeds in those hard green balls that are covered with stiff prickles and that hang from branches in clusters of two and three. There were sycamore trees in my childhood neighborhood in Georgia. And of course, we children did the only sensible thing we threw those hard prickly balls at each other!

Amos’ sycamore trees were not the same as our sycamore trees. Amos’ trees grew figs, sycamore figs. Sycamore figs are not as tasty as the figs we buy in the stores. Still, they are edible and tasty enough for humans. Mostly they were used to feed livestock. But the poor who could not afford more expensive fruit also ate them.

Dressing sycamore trees probably meant that workers climbed the tree and cut the unripe sycamore figs with a knife. The cuts caused the figs to release ethylene gas which ripened the figs within four days. Repeated dressings during the growing season could result in as many as six crops of figs!

Amos’ sycamore trees grew tall and made good lumber. Their leaves were also used as fodder for livestock. All in all, Amos’ sycamore trees would have been valuable assets.

If Amos owned fig orchards and lumber resources in addition to his flocks and herds, Amos may well have been a wealthy man. Indeed, it may have been his wealth which freed up Amos’ time for his brief prophetic mission to Israel.

So, Amos may be similar to modern-day Americans with his wealth. Maybe we are not, at the moment feeling all that wealthy but by world standards we are at the top of the pile. Data from the World Bank indicates that U. S. per capita income in 2023 is \$73,637 per year. The income for the rest of the world averages \$20,661 per year. During those times when we are not feeling so rich, we need to remember that, on average, we have more than three and one-half times the income of the rest of the world. And, yes, I know about the statistical problems of relying on averages still and all, we stand at the top of the income table for the nations of the world.

Another way in which Amos is similar to Americans, members of this community, is that Amos may have been relatively well educated for his time. The language of the book of Amos is widely regarded by scholars as that of an educated person. For proof, run the text of the book of Amos through the computer software program Grammatik to generate a readability score. Grammatik will report that the language of Amos is pitched to a fifth-grade reader. For comparison, Ernest Hemingway’s novels are written at the fourth-grade level.

Alan Baughcum

It is very difficult to write at that level. Most of us college-educated folks write extremely dense and frequently unreadable prose for other college-educated readers. When I worked for the federal government, I once wrote a memo on energy economics which, according to Grammatik, required someone with twenty-two (22) years of education to read. Of course, what that meant was that my memo was completely incomprehensible! It takes talent, skill, and education to speak and write so clearly and simply that anyone can understand what we write!

God called the wealthy and well-educated Amos to a mission. Amos' mission was to confront the rulers of Israel with the sins being committed in that country and to announce God's judgement of destruction of Israel.

The sins of Israel were many and were common in the societies that surrounded Israel at that time. But of course, Israel was party to a covenant with God that required Israel to live up to higher standards and behave differently from its neighbors.

Economic sins of the time included rich men inducing farmers to take out loans that they could not repay and then picking up their land for non-payment. Loss of land could well mean starvation for the farmer and family. The wealthy and powerful merchants also oppressed the poor in the marketplace with fraudulent weights and measures. They were not above adulterating the products they sold to increase profits. Then when the poor appealed to the courts, the wealthy denied them justice by bribing the judges.

The elites used much of the wealth taken from the poor to import expensive armaments for their military and luxury goods for themselves. Amos particularly hated the latest fad of his time, buying beds made with ivory. Neither armaments nor luxury goods benefitted the poor. The poor couldn't afford to purchase the expensive luxury goods. The armaments mostly protected the rich and powerful who lived in or near fortified cities, not the poor who lived in unprotected rural areas.

The sins of Israel extended to Israel's foreign policy. Israel's elites gloried in their military successes against their neighbors and deluded themselves that they were in control of their destiny. They had in effect declared their independence from God.

Israel's sins included religious sins. They worshiped local agricultural and nature gods — such as Ba'al and Asheroth and Dagan and Yam — in the hope of bringing forth good weather and ample rainfall to secure a plentiful harvest. At the same time Israel made a big deal about maintaining the formal rituals associated with the worship of Israel's own God.

Amos told the people of Israel that these formal rituals were in fact objectionable to God. Maintaining proper formal worship of Yahweh meant nothing if they were worshiping other gods and committing economic and social injustices against the poor. Conspicuous consumption, vast military expenditures, worshiping false gods, and acting unjustly against the poor of the world ... that sounds like news headlines from 2024.

Alan Baughcum

Having studied what the Bible has to say about wealth, my opinion is that God is not opposed to wealth per se. But God is concerned with how we gain our wealth, whether we do so by dealing fairly and honestly with our neighbors within the bounds of law, religion, and ethical behavior. God is also concerned with how we spend our wealth. God is vitally concerned about what wealth may do to us as a people. That is the real danger from wealth.

The wealth of Israel had lulled them into believing that they were in charge, not God. We in the U. S. today, like the elites of ancient Israel, must be especially careful lest we succumb to the illusion that we are in control of our own destiny, much less in charge of world history.

Like us, the people of Israel covered their bases. They worshiped other gods, nature gods -- as a kind of weather and economic insurance. Just to stay on God's good side, they followed the rituals of formal worship of Yahweh to the letter.

Americans are by most measures among the most religious people on the planet. Yet we seem to be willing to elevate popular entertainers, sports stars, political officials, and sometimes ideas and "isms" (such as capitalism and socialism) to a level which suggests we are running the risk of forgetting who our God is and who is in charge.

God's call to Amos, to the people of Israel, and to us may take many forms. But surely we can see that call to us, at least in part, in Psalms 82:3-4: "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." That applies not just in the U. S. but worldwide. When the modern prophet Mr. Rogers invited children to be his neighbors, he did not limit that invitation to U. S. children.

Just as God called Amos and the people of Israel to mission, so also does God call us to mission. God is asking us to use our resources of time, talent, and money on God's behalf.

Paul did that, 2000 years ago when he asked the followers of Jesus to contribute to the needs of the faithful poor in Jerusalem. At Colossians 1:9-12 he prays that they will "be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power . . ."

Just as God called the prophets of old, Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and John the Baptizer and Paul, God has a mission for each of us. Using traditional religious language, God is calling . . . God is calling . . . each of us to a mission.

God may call us to what may seem a small thing, for example, smiling at a neighbor or a co-worker and asking them how they are doing. It is amazing what mighty works can flow from the relationship that grows from that initial inquiry. All of the power of creation rests in new relationships that God calls into being. The power of creation can defeat the powers of destruction at work in our society and in our culture!

Alan Baughcum

As with ancient prophets and as with Amos, God may call us to big missions, telling the ruling powers that they are not truly in charge ... that it is God who is in charge. That seems especially relevant in a Presidential election year, with candidates running to be “in charge.” As Christians in this time, we have a special responsibility to speak boldly about the sins of our culture and our institutions, especially the sin of forgetting God and thinking we rule world history.

I close by encouraging those in this congregation who have been called to be bold and faithful in responding to that call. I ask those in this assembly who are listening for God’s call to listen intentionally and intently. You never know, it may not come with angels and trumpets in the heavens, it may come in a call from a friend or neighbor or stranger who needs help. When that call comes, be ready with a helping hand and a listening ear and a loving heart.

Amen.