

“Listening for the Voice of the Prophet”
Amos 7:10-17/Matthew 21:33-46
FPC/March 7, 2010 (3rd Sunday of Lent)
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

“One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish. This one has a little car. This one has a little star. My, what a lot of fish there are.” So begins Dr. Seuss’ book One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish, a book I read countless times to my kids when there were 3 and 4 years old.

Dr. Seuss was born in March 2, 1904, in Springfield, Mass. This past week his birthday was remembered. After publishing a few not well known but very imaginative books, he was asked by the publisher Random House to write a book that would be interesting to 5 and 6 year olds, and be really good for teaching them to read. Nine months later in 1957 The Cat in the Hat was published, using 220 different words. Within 5 years The Cat in the Hat had sold a million copies, and Dr. Seuss went on to write more than 60 children’s books.

To read a Dr. Seuss book is to enter a world of catchy rhythm and rhyme, nonsensical tongue-twisting words, and imaginative, humorous pictures. His books do help kids to develop reading skills.....and something else. If you listen, to read a Dr. Seuss book is also often to enter into a moral tale which challenges the reader to do the right thing and make a difference.

I was reminded of that this past Tuesday morning when I read in Mrs. Romo’s first grade class at Case Elementary School. To celebrate the birthday of Dr. Seuss I read The Lorax. It’s a story about greed and the destruction of the environment, and the challenge for the reader to be different. Most of the kids really understood the story.

And there’s also:

Horton Hears a Who, with the refrain “A person is still a person, no matter how small,” a story about equal rights for all people;

Yertle the Turtle, a story about a turtle king and Proverbs 16:18, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall;”

The Sneetches, a story about the foolishness of bigotry, racism, and labeling others;

The Butter Battle Book, a book written in the middle of the cold war with the former Soviet Union in 1984, about the escalation of an arms race over something as silly as whether it was better to butter the upper or lower side of the bread.

In the rhythm, rhyme and fun of Dr. Seuss, there is a voice that challenges children and adults to live better lives, make right choices, and care for all people. If we

listen there is a type of subtle, prophetic voice, I think, that holds up a mirror, and challenges us to be part of the answer and not the problem in the real world. We can read Dr. Seuss as entertainment, and not connect the book to our lives. Many people do. But to do so is to miss something important. And I think also we can hear the prophet Amos as a type of religious entertainment, and not connect it to our lives. Many people do. And, likewise, we miss something important.

II. Text

Read Amos 7:10-17

III. Brief Exegesis

A. The Priest Speaks to the King (vv.10-11). The prophet Amos is in Bethel, and there is a significant confrontation with the chief priest Amaziah. Bethel is the home of the royal temple. It is where the king and his family worship. And the religion there has been designed for almost 200 years to support the king and the nation. It is state religion.....religion and state joined together to support each other. And Bethel is the center of it all.

Amaziah is the chief priest there.....the head of staff of the most powerful and most desirable temple. He's probably skilled.....gifted....and worked hard to get there. He knows the right people.....got the right education.....paid his dues.....made the right career decisions.....and now he's on top at Bethel.

As an arm of the state, and an employee of the state, it should not surprise us that he reports to the king. His primary loyalty is to the system, the nation and the king. Perhaps there is a "tip of the hat" to God, but that is not where his primary loyalty lies. Amaziah is a gifted product of the state religious system, and his job is to keep it running well. His future depends on it.

But the words of Amos have not been good for the state, king, or state religion.....so Amaziah the priest reports the words of the prophet to the king. And Amos' words are also just not appropriate for a temple like Bethel. This is the royal temple, and Amos' words are just not in keeping with the propriety of the place. It's interesting to note that Amaziah never considers Amos to speak God's word. God is not really part of Amaziah's world. Rather it's power, politics and propriety.

B. The Priest Speaks to the Prophet (vv.12-13). After word is sent to his employer, the king, Amaziah now speaks to Amos. We see his gifts as an administrator. There's a reason he's the head of staff at the royal temple. Amaziah doesn't want any trouble from Amos, nor does he want a martyr on his hands. It just doesn't fit Bethel. Amaziah knows the response of the king to Amos will be sudden and severe. But he gives Amos a way out. Amaziah the skilled administrator has a good answer to the problem: "Go. Amos, go back to your home country. Amos, go back to

your country Judah where our king has no power. Amos, go and save your life.” And we know that if Amos goes the “headache at Bethel” will be gone. Amaziah’s life would become much easier; problem solved. He assumes that Amos is just “one of the two bit religious loud mouths”.....a self proclaimed prophet who claims to have a message from God, and will share it for a few bucks.....a man a little off “who’s a square peg in a round hole” at Bethel.....a religious fanatic who’s disrupting the appropriate decorum of the royal temple. “Go. It’s best for everyone.” Amaziah is a skilled administrator, but he has no ear to listen for the word of God.

C. The Prophet Speaks to the Priest (vv.14-17). The book of Amos begins with the verse, “The Lord roars from Zion” (1:2). The response of Amos to Amaziah is a roar in Bethel. First Amos challenges Amaziah’s assumption. Amaziah only knows prophets as either on the pay role to support the king and national interests, or “prophets for profit” who supply a type of religious entertainment for a fee. He assumes that Amos is one of these. Amos makes it clear that he is neither. He is simply a layman called by God to deliver a message to Israel.....to the king.....to Amaziah. He is called by God who rules over all.....and not called by some king who rules over Israel. Amaziah, the “corporate guy,” has never met anyone like this before. At the royal shrine in Bethel, the high priest is confronted with the word of God.

Amaziah has spoken his word. They are awaiting the word of King Jeroboam II. Now it is time for Amos to speak God’s word. In the beauty and splendor of the temple in Bethel Amos speaks a hard word of God’s judgment. It is the only time he speaks to a specific person. But the words of judgment spoken to Amaziah are words spoken to all:

A war is coming, and the mighty army of Israel will fall;
Amaziah’s wife will be forced into the shame of a prostitute;
His children shall be killed;
His land shall be divided up among the victors;

And he will be taken to a foreign land, and die amidst an unclean culture with unclean gods.

Amaziah’s priesthood and all he stood for would be brought to an end.....and so too it will be for Israel.

The words of Amos are a sharp contrast to the concern of Amaziah for appropriateness, propriety, decorum and a “smooth running organization.” They are “jarring” if we will listen.

D. Jesus Speaks to the Priests (Matthew 21:33-46). In our text from Matthew we hear of another prophet speaking in the royal temple. Jesus is in the temple in

Jerusalem, and his words are not appropriate for the propriety, decorum and “smooth running of that temple.” Like Bethel, the temple in Jerusalem serves the interests of the powers.....and like Amos, Jesus’ words are the word of God against those powers. The priests and the other powers there know Jesus speaks against them. And so they go to work to silence this prophet and speaker. Like Amaziah they have told Jesus, “Go.” They now work on darker plans. And like Amaziah before them, they will choose to not believe the word of the prophet.....and they too will be swept away.

IV. Reflections

In the passage from Amos I know I am not like Jeroboam II. I am not the king of anything. And I know I am not like Amos. I am not a prophet. But I also know I do not want to be like Amaziah; the administrator of a religious system who is deaf to the word of God, and concerned primarily with the propriety, appropriateness and decorum of powers served by the status quo. I don’t believe you really want that either.

So how do we hear the voice of the prophet? How do we hear the word of God that may be as subtle as Dr. Seuss, or as blunt as Amos? I think the first answer is to simply listen. It’s to believe that the word of God is still spoken. It’s to pray to have an open ear, an open heart, and an open mind. It’s to practice the discipline of silence.

About a year ago I began to think about the popularity of the coffee house environment for people today. A coffee bar, high tables and chairs, overstuffed chairs, wireless internet, and smell of fresh coffee.....it speaks of fellowship....friends getting together. It’s where I sometimes go, and where you sometimes go. It’s also what new church buildings are including in their design. A coffee house style is modern, contemporary and popular. And I thought we might do a light remodel of our library and try it.....our own coffee house for before and after worship.....a place for church meetings.....a place for Bible studies.....maybe even a place to have open for the community. Coffee@First....thought the idea had some possibilities.

And then a few months ago I read a brief article from a pastor in a new missional church. He wrote about the push of the church beyond itself to the community....to get out where God was doing mission. And I thought, “Yea, that’s who I am and what I want.” And then this pastor went on to say, “I don’t want our congregation to gather in a coffee house in our church. Rather I want our folks to be out in the coffee houses in the community.” Ouch!! It felt like the Coffee@First idea just got “blindsided.” Now I’m wondering, is that a prophetic voice.....is it the word of God for us? Or is it the good idea of that pastor for the congregation where he serves? I don’t know yet. But I’m still listening to it.

Listening matters.....and I think to not become Amaziah, and hear the word of God also take humility. I think it means realizing I might not have it right.....that I might be going the wrong way.....that the plan of God just might be something I hadn't realized.

I was reminded of something I've shared with you before. In 1989 I went with a small group of 10 from Union Theological Seminary to Ghana, Africa. We were there for a month. One day while we were there we visited a castle on the coast of Ghana named Elmina. It was built in the 15th C by the Portuguese, and taken over by the Dutch in the 17th C. Now it stands abandoned. When the Dutch took over in the 17th C this castle was a place where captured Africans were shackled and imprisoned before being shipped away and sold as slaves. Knowing the history of Elmina there was a sadness and heaviness about the place. As we climbed up the steps from the women's dungeon we were surprised to emerge into chapel; a space used by the Dutch Reformed Christians there as a place of worship. Over the entrance was inscribed Psalm 132:13; "The Lord has chosen Zion." For 200 years Christians who counted themselves as the "the Lord's chosen" had worshipped, prayed, sung and heard scripture there, while directly beneath them human beings were imprisoned and to be sold as slaves.

And the thing that causes me to remember and ponder the place is that the people who gathered there to worship God were so sure they were right....were so sure that there was no conflict between the God they worshipped and the slave trade they practiced. We see the evil of the practice now, but not then. I wonder, was there a prophetic word then that they chose to ignore. And I wonder about any positions I might be so sure about.....and what will become clear in another 50, 100 or 200 years. Do I, do you, ignore prophetic words? I believe it takes humility to hear a prophetic voice.

The voice of the prophet still speaks the word of God. It can be as blunt as Amos, as troubling as Elmina, or a subtle as Dr. Seuss. It is probably a good idea to humbly listen.