

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, July 4, 2010 based on Amos 7:7-17.

Being a Prophet in America Today

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty,

Of thee I sing:

land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride

From every mountainside let freedom ring!

I love being an American! I love being part of this country and receiving all the benefits of being an American citizen. I love that we have rights like freedom of speech and freedom of movement. I love that we have choices about how to live our life and who we can associate with. I love the economic opportunities of being an American and the quality of life I have. I love being an American.

Being an American does frustrate me sometimes. It frustrates me about some of the policies of our elected leaders, where we are going as a nation, and how we use our resources for the common good. My guess is that there are things that frustrate you about being an American.

The prophet Amos seemed to love being an Israelite and had some things to say to his leaders about how to be one. Amos lived 750 years before the birth of Jesus. As you heard in scripture today, Amos was not a professional prophet or preacher. He was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.

Amos is one of the small books in the Hebrew Scriptures. I don't know about you, but I get confused about when the people we call "prophets" lived. There are 17 books in the Hebrew Scriptures that contain the thoughts of men who called themselves "prophets." Our problem is

that if we were going to be organizing the books of the prophets in any kind of order, we would put them in chronological order so that we would have a sense of who spoke when, etc.

Unfortunately, the people who put the Hebrew Scriptures together had a different way of doing things. The books of the prophets are in order of length. Isaiah is the longest so it is first, Jeremiah and his book of Lamentations is the next longest so they are second and third. Ezekiel is next longest, so it is fourth, etc.

In our Bibles, Amos appears eighth in the "Prophets" section of the scriptures, but Amos should be first in chronological order because he was the first one that felt called by God to speak out and bring a message to the leaders of the land. Amos was the first that started a prophetic practice that lasted for 300 years for the people of Israel.

At the time that Amos began his preaching, Israel was divided into two kingdoms – Israel in the north with King Jeroboam on the throne and Judah in the south with Uzziah as king. This was a prosperous time for both Israel and Judah. There were no mega countries threatening Israel and Judah at the time, and the two countries had come to work together to establish trade routes that brought them goods and revenue. Not since the time of Solomon 200 years before had the country been so peaceful and prosperous.

But there was a problem. The prosperity was not being shared in a fair way with everyone. A few were getting fabulously rich and yet many others were losing their property and being sold into slavery to pay debts.

John Bright, an Old Testament scholar puts it this way in his book, *A History of Israel – Israelite society, as Amos lets us see it, was marked by egregious injustices and a shocking contrast between extremes of wealth and poverty. The small farmer whose economic status was marginal at best, found himself often at the mercy of the moneylender and, at the slightest calamity – a drought, a crop failure was liable to foreclosure and eviction, if not bond service. The system, which was itself harsh, was made harsher by the greed of the wealthy, who took unmerciful advantage of the plight of the poor in order to enlarge their holdings, often resorting to the sharpest practices, the falsification of weights and measures, and various legal dodges to achieve their ends. But though dishonest practices obtained everywhere, since the judges were venal, the poor had no redress. In increasing numbers they were robbed and dispossessed.*

This was the world that Amos entered when he came from his home in Judah and spoke out at the king's temple in Bethel. He asked the leaders of the land to remember the idea of who they were as God's people. He reminded them that they were in covenant with God, that this God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and given them freedom in the promised land. He reminded them that in the wilderness, God had shown them how to live together fairly and in community. He reminded them that God wanted people to find their way but that people had to have ways to make a good living and benefit from hard work. Amos spoke about justice and fairness and reminded them of the higher nature of their existence and that God would not bless an unjust people. In Amos 5:24 he declared, *"let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* Amos declared that they couldn't count on being a blessed nation unless they were a just nation.

As American, we have ideals, but we struggle with our ideals. Today is the Fourth of July, and it is a good day to talk about ideals like – *We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness* - from the Declaration of Independence.

Or these words *We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

As a nation, we are people of ideas where all can be free, where all have equal opportunity to pursue their dreams, where there is justice, where all can find their piece of the pie and create more pie. Only a land based on justice and fairness can achieve these blessings.

Amos spoke about letting justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. You heard what happened to him in scripture – He was invited to stop talking and go home. This is often what happens to prophets even today. Nobody likes to hear about the dark side of how a system works, especially when you are the one benefiting from that system.

We live in a great country. We have great ideals and aspirations. We are the envy of many in the world. But we struggle with living up to our ideals of equality and fairness in our systems. We have this struggle between ideals and the desire for security and advantage that allows us to compromise our ideals.

It takes courage, for example to provide people the education and tools they need to thrive and find their way. It takes courage to give the poor ways to be represented in the courts. It takes courage to be fair with people and not take advantage of a situation. It takes courage to set up systems for all people to grow and achieve. But this is what a just nation does!

Don't get me wrong, we have accomplished much, but we are losing our nerve to believe that living our ideals of equity and fairness will benefit more people and blesses us by the God that believes in justice.

Amos is in the Hebrew Scriptures because 25 years after he spoke, the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to exist when it was taken over by a foreign power. For the Israelites, it was a reminder that actions and policies have consequences. Today we have prophets that are reminding us of our ideals and the consequences of not living in a just land.

One spring day before the American Civil War, a poorly dressed boy appeared at the door of Worthy Taylor, a successful farmer in Portage County, Ohio. The youngster asked the farmer for work, and although Mr. Taylor knew nothing about the lad, excepting his name, Jim, he gave him a job. Jim spent the summer working hard, cultivating the growing crops and helping in the harvest, bringing in the cows from distant fields for morning and evening milking, and cutting wood for the farmhouse stoves. He slept in the haymow and ate in the farm kitchen.

Jim formed a strong liking for Worthy Taylor's daughter. Later this affection turned to love. But Jim was refused permission to marry the girl. His father told the boy that his prospects were too poor. He had no

money, no reputation, and no apparent talents. So Jim took his few belongings, stuffed them into his old carpetbag, and went away.

35 years came and went. One day Mr. Taylor, now an old man, tore down his barn to make space on the farm lot for a new one. Far up on the rafters about the haymow he found where that hired farmhand Jim had carved his name – James A. Garfield. At that moment James A Garfield was President of the United States of America.

Worthy Taylor was no encouragement to the hidden possibilities within young Jim Garfield. But other people awakened the best in him so that an unlikely appearing farm lad grew into a great servant of the American people.

President Garfield was the 20th president of the United States and became the 2nd president killed in office by being shot by a disgruntled office seeker 4 months into office. President Garfield did not have much time to do things as President but at his inauguration in 1881 he spoke eloquently by saying -

The elevation of the [negro](#) race from [slavery](#) to the full rights of [citizenship](#) is the most important political change we have known since the adoption of the Constitution of 1787 ”

“ ...there was no middle ground for the negro race between slavery and equal citizenship. There can be no permanent disfranchised [peasantry](#) in the [United States](#). Freedom can never yield its fullness of blessings so long as the law or its administration places the smallest obstacle in the pathway of any virtuous citizen.

... words to live by still today.

Freedom, liberty, justice, community – these are still important words today. Today we remember the words of Amos that tell us that a blessed nation is a just nation, and that there has to be a way for all to find what they need to live or there is no peace.

Amos pulled out a plumb line today in scripture and said God would not past that plumb line because Israel could no long keep their ideals straight. God has a plumb line for us today that reminds us that God blesses a just people.

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Amen.