

Silence in an evil time

An enigmatic verse from the prophet Amos stuck in my soul's craw.

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It was a sermon remnant, an odd outlier that required attention. I was reflecting on the book of Amos, one of the fiercest prophets of justice in the Hebrew scriptures. Most of the message worked with what I was preparing, reflecting on how socioeconomic power disparities create additional suffering in times of ecological crisis. And, of course, how pleased Jesus is at all the unnecessary suffering our greed creates.

A nice, light, sermon, in other words.

But one verse from Amos just stuck in my soul's craw. It didn't mesh. It needed more attention: "Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time."

From one of the fiercest and loudest prophetic critics of greed and injustice in scripture, that was ... strange. "Enigmatic," as my study Bible so helpfully offered.

I mucked about in commentaries for a bit, and found the sort of disagreement that tends to arise when scholars are really just kind of spitballing at something. A minority suggested that this meant that the "prudent" folk are privileged cowards, who from their cowardice refuse to take up the mantle of condemning injustice. Many, though, took it a different way, because prudence is a fundamental biblical virtue and all.

The wise soul offers what can be heard, and speaks when there is hope that a soul might listen and be moved. Wisdom does not speak to hear the sound of its own voice, or from a place of ego, or from desire to control. It speaks to teach, and to improve, wherever such an opportunity arises.

In times when evil walks loud and proud on the earth, it is the wise course of action to lay low and say little. Why? Because evil does not listen. Evil is sure of itself, even more deeply so when it holds the power for which it hungers. Evil will not be moved, or changed, or turned. The words of the wise, or of a prophet, mean nothing to the fool, the bully, or the tyrant.

In such a place and time, wise words are both pointless and very potentially dangerous. Reading back deeply into historical commentaries, this seems to be the consensus. Not a particularly reassuring consensus, I'll admit. But one worth hearing, particularly in our current cultural context.

If we're in a moment in our life together where patience, grace, and justice are parsed as cowardice, weakness, and treason, how can we meaningfully speak truth to those who wish to hear only their own power?

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