

July 10, 15C (Amos 7:7-17)

The prophets God sends among us are often vilified, distorted, and silenced.

by [Crystal DesVignes](#) in the [June 29, 2022](#) issue

The church tends to have a problem with prophetic gifts. We want pastors to love people and rarely if ever to offer a word of rebuke, reproof, or correction. We see the prophetic as being too harsh, and we warn those who have a word of discipline for the church to temper it, to water it down, to include a spoonful of sugar. We hold them personally accountable for the rebuke or corrective word they bear.

Some people believe that the priestly and prophetic roles should stay separate and have no influence over each other; they put those God would use in a spiritual gift box. Some expect this separation to be upheld even by those who find themselves gifted by the Holy Spirit to operate in either realm. Others will accept a prophetic word as long as it comes from particular people with specific credentials who show up in ways they feel comfortable with. Still others like their pastors to be prophetic, but only a little and only occasionally.

Folks don't mind being challenged in the ways they want to be challenged. This is the new standard of the church, or so it seems. But is this the standard that comes from God?

The prophet Amos is from Tekoa, a southern town in Judah, not too far from Bethlehem. Amos goes to the northern town of Bethel to prophesy to the people of Israel. He has a lot to say about what Israel is getting wrong and the judgment that God is about to render.

In this week's reading we see one vision in particular: God is holding a plumb line. A plumb line is a type of standard, a measure used to calculate if a wall is straight. The plumb line God is holding is a symbol for the standard by which God will measure and judge Israel. As God's people, they are required and responsible to act according to God's will. Israel has fallen short of God's standard, says Amos, and

God will judge their behavior.

Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sends a word to the king about the prophetic judgment Amos has proclaimed. Bethel, which literally means “house of God,” is the site of a showdown of words between Amaziah and Amos. “Never again prophesy at Bethel,” says Amaziah, “for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.” Amaziah presumes that he gets to dictate which prophetic utterance is allowed in God’s house and who is qualified to offer it.

Who gets to speak for God? This is something that we in the church continue to struggle with today. We want to put limits on who can speak, where their message will be heard, and what the contents of the message should be. Those with a prophetic word have to walk on eggshells to get the people of God to open their ears and listen. Those who have a word from the Lord are rebuked because they don’t come in a form that makes those who need the word comfortable. Prophets have been killed, both spiritually and physically, because their message was too sharp and accurate for people to bear. We deem people’s messages “political” and dismiss them if they call us to something we don’t want to act upon at the moment. From Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer to Marsha P. Johnson, a gay liberation activist who helped spark the Stonewall protests, to today’s justice-minded preachers who self-censor for fear of congregational backlash: the voices of the prophets God sends among us are often vilified, distorted, and silenced.

I find the situation puzzling. How are we—who have been blessed by the Holy Spirit, who have been given the promise that the Holy Spirit has fallen on all flesh and that therefore our children will prophesy—how are we not to expect the prophetic to be rampant and operating freely in our midst?

In the book of Revelation, Jesus tells the church in Laodicea, “I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.” Instead of believing that the Holy Spirit’s work will lead to prophetic encouragement, correction, reproof, and discipline, we, like Amaziah, have told those called by God to go away.

Perhaps we need to take our cues from Amos—someone who was an outsider, who did not identify as a prophet, and who left his day job to be obedient to the voice of God. Perhaps we need to expect that the prophetic utterances of the Lord will come and to suppose that they will come from those we least expect. Perhaps God is setting a plumb line in our midst today to see if we will accept the prophets that God sends.