

May I speak in the name of the God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're continuing today in our sermons to focus on the Old Testament thread of our readings. And in the next few weeks, we'll look at two very different Old Testament books are going to come up. Amos, as today and next week. Then the book of Hosea. And I happen to love them both. They're two of my favorite biblical books. They're both what's called minor prophets. They come right at the end of the Old Testament. They're not called that because they're any less important than the other prophetic books it's just that they're shorter. So, the Minor Prophets are shorter books than the Major Prophets. It's similar to the school days. Well, in my school days anyway, when if you had a younger brother at school they'd be minor as in Hargreaves and Hargreaves, minor, would be how we'd be distinguished.

Amos and Hosea are different, but they share a historical context. They both lived at the same time. They both lived in the 8th Century BC, which was a very interesting time for the people of Israel. It was a time of peace and stability. King Jeroboam and King Uzziah both reigned for over 40 years, and they oversaw unprecedented growth and wealth development and it was a time of transition from an agricultural to a commercial economy. The industries were growing and people were moving to the cities. A new class of wealthy merchants emerged, and we know from reading Amos and Hosea that they lived well. They had winter houses and summer houses furnished with carved ivory. The structure of society was changing and a gap was opening between the rich and the poor.

And it wasn't just the economy that was booming. The temples were full of life and color. The sanctuaries like Bethel that's referred to in this passage where overcrowded and the rituals were getting more and more luxurious and elaborate. And it was into this situation that God sent Amos and Hosea to prophesy. Amos saw that underneath the veneer of success all was not well in the land of Israel. Its neighbors were on the rise and the glory days were coming to an end. I don't think that Jerusalem had a stock market in those days, but if it did it would have been at record highs when Amos began preaching.

But Amos saw that there were other ways of measuring the health of the State of Israel. For instance, there was

God's plumb line. Amos had a vision of God standing beside a wall with a plumb line. And I'm sure we all know what they are. They're just a piece of string with a weight on the bottom which because of gravity is always going to fall in a perfectly straight line. Builders still use them today to check that a wall that's been built is straight. Amos' message was clear. He was saying to the people, "You think everything's okay. You think everything's in order and tickety-boo. But not according to God's measurement. According to God's measure, according to his plumb line, things have gone awry. They're not straight. They're off-kilter." Amos' preaching had the refrain, "You've oppressed the poor and crushed the needy." He railed against the lack of justice in the land. His central theme was picked up in the psalm that we've just read together, from Psalm 82. "How long will you judge unjustly and show favor to the wicked? Save the weak and the orphan. Defend the humble and needy. Rescue the weak and the poor. Deliver them from the power of the wicked." That cry for social justice is there throughout the Old Testament. It comes to the fore in Amos and the other minor prophets.

There was a mother once who was very surprised when her nine-year-old came to her and said, "Mummy," because it was an English boy, "Mummy, guess what? I'm 8'4" tall." The mother looked at him and said, "No, you're not. You're 4'2". You've been using a six-inch ruler." He'd measured himself with a six-inch ruler he thought was a foot and he'd come up with a ridiculous result. The people of Israel were making a similar mistake and in fact, it's a mistake we can all make. Measuring ourselves by the wrong measure or standard. Things look fine for the people of Israel. But God's plumb line showed them to be morally and spiritually bankrupt. We can dare to look at ourselves honestly by His standards because the God who holds the plumb line is a God who forgives us and restores us.

I want to go on and point to a common theme in both the Amos reading and the Gospel that we've just heard. That very familiar Gospel of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In both of these readings, the priests are the bad guys. Look who it is who confronts Amos after he shares his prophecy of judgment. It's Amaziah the priest of Bethel. He tells Amos to go away. "You're not welcome here at the sanctuary in Bethel," he says. Amaziah the priest gets it as wrong as the priest in the Good Samaritan story, who famously passes by on the

other side and ignores the man who'd been left half dead.

The Gospel reading and the reading from Amos both make the same point, that God uses unlikely people. Not necessarily the religious ones, the ones you might expect to be doing the right thing. And the Samaritan was about as unlikely hero as there could possibly be. And look how Amos answers Amaziah, "I'm no prophet. Nor a prophet's son. I'm a simple herdsman," he says. It was Amaziah who was the priest, who was part of the religious establishment. But it wasn't Amaziah who God chose to work through. It was Amos, the simple shepherd. And there's an important point here for all of us. We are all God's unlikely people. We can all be ready and expectant to be used by God. We all have a part to play in developing God's Kingdom.

At our recent congregational meeting, there was a feedback form in which one of the questions asked was, "What our priorities should be as a church?" One answer came up several times, along the lines of grow the congregation. Let me say this, that's not something that could be left to the priests. It's too important a job to be left to the priests. They're not even necessarily the best place to do it. We all need to be talking to family, friends, neighbors, sharing our stories of faith, inviting people to come to church to hear something of the good news that we preach. We are God's unlikely people. That is the task before us.

Finally, I want to say something about the way that God communicates with Amos in this story. Amos doesn't get taken up into a trance or have some intense mystical experience here. There's a naturalness about his conversation with God as it develops. He's not transported to a heavenly realm. He sees God on a building site. And it might well be that he literally was going past a building site and saw a builder with a plumb line and God spoke to him through that because we could see elsewhere in these prophetic books, that's what happened, that the prophets were very sensitive to what was going on around them and they could discern God's leading, opening up the things, the meaning to things they were seeing. And again, I think there's something that we can learn here. God speaks to his people, his unlikely people, in any number of ways, some of which might appear extremely mundane. But we need to be open to hearing God's voice, to recognizing the Spirit's lead in the midst of our everyday mundane lives. That's the place where God meets with

his people. We need to be ready to discern what it is that God is saying to us. And we'll be hearing more from Amos next week and expect more of the same, God's unlikely prophet who heard from God in a number of ways but always spoke out, and always spoke out on the side of the poor.

Amen.