

Prophet, Priest, King

Amos 7:7-15

Mark 6:14-29

“Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.

In the aftermath of a week when the leaders of the nations have been so much in the news, I found myself paying particular attention to the political and spiritual leaders who populate the world of the Bible. The passages before us this morning contain quite a few: Amos the eighth century prophet and John the Baptist, whom some say was the last of the prophets; Amaziah the priest of Bethel; King Jeroboam of Israel and wannabe King Herod Antipas who was tetrarch of Galilee. Each man was anointed to one of the three offices of leadership in the Old Testament, meaning oil was ceremonially poured on his head to seal God’s choice of him. The same three offices became the three offices John Calvin famously located in the person and work of Jesus Christ, Christ meaning Anointed and Jesus being the (capital A, capital O) Anointed One who, in these latter days, has anointed the church prophet, priest and king.

“What a prophets does,” according to Sam Wells, rector of London’s St. Martins in the Field, “is to hold up a mirror to society or an individual and ask, ‘Are you proud of what you see?’ A prophet recalls the founding commitments of a person or a body of people and asks, ‘Have those commitments been honored?’ A prophet casts a dream of what it might mean for people or societies to fulfill their potential and says, ‘Look, here is the painful gap between ideal and reality.’...Prophets challenge, reconfigure, expose, highlight, ridicule and shock.”

What a priest does is intercede with God on behalf of the people, first by purifying, cleansing and making holy both temple and people so that God may be approached; then by offering sacrifices for sin, guilt and well-being to restore the people’s broken relationship with God. Finally the priest teaches the people God’s statutes and ordinances so that they may obey God and be identified as this God’s people in the world.

As far as the office of king is concerned in Scripture, God alone is king. God rules over the other gods, over all creation and over every nation. As king, God uses the nations to bring about God’s will on earth and delegates God’s rule of the earth to earthly kings—hence Paul’s admonition in Romans concerning the obedience owed earthly rulers that had been anointed by God. The authority of the king was secured by the ideology of divine selection—or at least that was what the king told the people and that was what the people wanted to believe. On God’s behalf, the king guaranteed prosperity, safety and long life to those who were obedient to God’s will.

Because prophets, priest and kings were called by God to do what they do, you might expect them to work together for good. Yet in the one long sentence that is our text, clearly the relationship among prophet, priest and king in eighth century Israel was anything but cozy. Only Amos rightly fulfills the office to which God calls him. He prophesied during a time of pride and plenty, when there was “splendor in the land, elegance in the cities and might in the palaces”; and when, at the same time, Abraham Heschel writes, “there was no justice in the land, the poor were afflicted... and the judges corrupt.” Far from ruling as a conduit of divine blessing or as a servant of God’s will, King Jeroboam, like most kings in the Old Testament, flaunted the power and authority given him by God over God’s people, using it for selfish gain.

The mirror Amos holds up to King Jeroboam and the nation at the wall of the city was something like a plumb line. By God’s measure, Amos says with this dramatic gesture, the nation had become so crooked and so corrupt under Jeroboam’s kingship that the queen will become a prostitute, the king and his children will die, the land will be lost and the people will be marched into exile. Amos challenged, exposed, ridiculed, and shocked the nation with the words God told him to speak.

Now you would expect the priest to follow up on the prophet’s words with his own robust condemnation of the king and a demand that the king and the nation make sacrifices to God for their sin and guilt. Instead, Amaziah the priest steps in to play the part of the king’s protector and champion. “O seer,” he says to Amos cynically, “go flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the *king’s sanctuary*, and it is a *temple of the kingdom*.” That is to say, the priest is acting not as an intercessor for the people to God or God to the people but as the king’s protector and advocate.

Amaziah was not the first priest to do this. Rather he stepped into what has become a long line of priests whose allegiance is to power and prosperity at the expense of the poor, the outcast, the widow and the orphan. To wit: this week my brother forwarded an email from an evangelical friend of his who used to produce the 700 Club. In the email was a link to a statement *by* evangelical preachers, including Liz Theoharis, a PCUSA minister who spoke at our General Assembly, written *to* evangelical preachers about the current unholy alliance between priests and rulers that can be traced in this nation all the way back to the time of the Civil War. Apparently in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when every major denomination including our own was splitting over the question of slavery, “plantation owners (rulers, of sort) paid preachers and theologians (priests, if you will) to write defenses of slaveholder religion. [With the help of these priests,] slaveholders produced a Bible without the Exodus, the prophets, and Jesus’ central teachings.” Lest you think this is fake news, I researched it. The so-called Slave Bible is on display at the Museum of the Bible in Washington. In it, fourteen of the Bible’s sixty-six books survived the slaveholder’s cut. If you think about it, in order for God to underwrite slavery, a lot of the biblical text would have to go! The Women’s Subjugation Bible might be a little thicker. The Homosexuality Bible could pretty much fit in a pamphlet. But I digress. “During Reconstruction, the same preachers decried the ‘immorality’ of Reconstruction,” aligning religion with rulers who continued to rig the system, both economically and politically, to benefit former slaveholders. Liz Theoharis and the authors of this statement go on to trace that same history through the alignment of white main line denominations to segregationists after *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 and finally through today’s alliance between Washington and white evangelical preachers.

The problem with the offices of prophet, priest and king? Throughout history they have been occupied by sinful men and, only lately, sinful women, who are as subject to self-interest, to personal gain, and to fear-mongering as the people whom they have been set apart, if no longer anointed by God, to serve.

Beginning in the fourth century with Eusebius and reaching its fullest expression with John Calvin in the sixteenth century, the teachers of the church saw in Jesus the one human being who alone was the Anointed One, who was rightly and righteously prophet, priest and king. “Why is he called Christ, that is, the Anointed One?” asks the 31<sup>st</sup> question of the Heidelberg Catechism. Answer: “Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be our eternal King, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.”

Translated into 21<sup>st</sup> century language, Christ is the mirror in whose image we behold the painful gap between who we are and the human being we were created to be. Christ is the priest who was the sacrifice, assuming our estrangement from God as his own and so reconciling us to the love for which we were made. Christ is the king who will eternally govern, direct, guide and sustain us until he leads us to the home he has prepared for us.

“But why,” the Heidelberg Catechism next asks, “are you called a Christian?” Answer: “Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing ....” The church shares in Christ and thus in his anointing, which is to say that the church is to be prophet, priest and king until he comes again. The church as prophet. Following him who was anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, may we more and more be a community set apart to discern God’s will and speak God’s word of truth to power, even at the cost of her own life. The church as priest. Following him who entered the human condition of alienation (of “oppression as political alienation, poverty as economic alienation, sickness as physical alienation, slavery as alienation from one’s human identity”), making it his own, may we, more and more, enter into every present manifestation of alienation as intercessors on behalf of the dignity, health and wholeness of each child of God. Finally, the church as king. Following him whose power was made perfect in weakness, may we, more and more, be a community of servant leaders, bearing witness to God’s preferential love for the stranger, the outcast, the refugee, the forgotten of the earth until we are all presented, wholly ourselves, before the throne of grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.