

On Sunday, February 17, 2013, Professor Oz Cole-Arnal took on the character of the Hebrew prophet, Amos, and re-worked Amos's original message to Amaziah and Israel to address the many injustices of our present-day society. Although the script of Oz's prophecy is not presented here, he has provided us with his reflection on the experience of taking on the persona of Amos.

THE PROCLAMATION OF AMOS

Lent 1 – departure from the Revised Common Lectionary: Amos 1:1 – 9:15

Was that Amos or Oz who appeared uninvited (sort of) and disrupted this last Sunday's service? Or perhaps was it a mix of both? Although difficult to answer with assurance, a solid step in that direction might be to summarize what we know about the Biblical Amos and his message.

Of the four eighth-century BCE prophets scheduled to visit us this calendar year, sadly we know the least about Amos. He is one of two prophets from the actual prophetic books to preach in the northern kingdom known as Israel. However, unlike his counterpart Hosea, Amos was not native to Israel. He came from Tekoa, a trading village in the kingdom of Judah, just shy of its northern neighbour. Amos was a nobody from the lowliest of agrarian classes; likely a hireling shepherd guarding others' flocks and making a little (a very little) extra tending fruit-producing trees. Although most certainly illiterate, that lack of formal learning most likely heightened his awareness of the oppressed and vulnerable sectors of society to whom he gave voice in his prophetic oracles. Hence our present-day Amos was a foreigner from the U.S., a coal miner in western Pennsylvania, akin to the Arnal men who worked the mines there and in France, and risked life and limb to organize miners into unions; "nobodies" of whom our visiting Amos remains very proud.

The message of the 2,800 year-old Amos stands out in harsh clarity, and was delivered, in part, at Israel's religious citadel, the holy shrine to God at Bethel, presided over by the high priest Amaziah (aka Pastor James Brown, thanks Rev. "Jimmy"). Either Amos himself or the literate editors who put his words in a scroll brought forth his fulminations quite engagingly. The oracles begin with a common refrain: "For three sins of _____ and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, ... says the LORD." Beginning with harangues against Israel's enemy neighbours, the prophet moves closer and closer to Israel itself.

We experienced the same with our visiting, present-day Amos – first China, then Iran (nations whose governments Canadians love to hate); then to the U.S. where more ambivalent feelings reside (much like Judah to Israel's south); and then finally the hammer of the prophet strikes home literally – hitting Canada itself (Israel) and its political, economic and religious establishment. (In the book of Amos, the target is the monarchy with its wealthy elite bleeding and crushing the poor, and then justifying this rapaciousness with its "flunky" religious elite mouthing the nation's praise out of the Bethel shrine.)

In attempting to be true to Amos's oracles, our visiting prophet sought to name the current violations of covenant injustice within our own Canadian financial, corporate, political and religious establishments. In doing so, this attempt had to include the divine naming of injustice within all of us, including, of course, the one (Oz) who dared to bring Amos back to painful life.

Although our visiting Amos embodies some of the privileges, the almost-three-millennia-old Amos did not. The slightly-younger-Amos felt acutely like the prophet of old – the heavy weight of God's call to preach this horribly unpopular message. He reminded the hearers that, although God embraces a particular people into a special covenant, this same God liberates and cares for all nations; and all creation, including the distant stars. And, like the Amos of old, our visiting finger-pointer sought to express the pain felt by Amos by begging the plumb-line-judging God to relent because Canada (like ancient Israel) so tiny and so small, is unable to bear the pain and weight of God's righteous judgment.

So, who appeared in church to disrupt our service and harangue us about God's justice? Amos or Oz?* Or both? Perhaps, in the great scheme of things, it doesn't matter, if we, as the people of God, join hands together, supporting each other, guided by this dangerous series of books we

call the Bible, and heed that glorious call of old obnoxious Amos and together “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream.”

Post-script: Actually there is an “Amos Oz”, an Israeli Jew, a fiction and non-fiction writer, who seeks peace for Jews and Palestinians in his strife-torn land. “Amos Oz!” Hhmmm! Ain’t that a hoot?