

Thinking About Politics and Religion with Amos and John the Baptist

Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29

Tomorrow Barry and I celebrate our 35th wedding anniversary. Barry is a political scientist by training, who teaches public policy. And of course religion is my bag. So for 35 years we've been having conversations you're not supposed to have in polite company, especially these days – about politics and religion. Our texts today flirt with the relationship between politics and religion. Actually our first reading from Amos cuts to the heart of it. So jump with me to the Ancient Near East and let's explore together.

Here's the context in the book of Amos: Israel was enjoying a long awaited time of peace and prosperity. There was no military threat, Israel controlled crucial trade routes so merchants piled up big profits. Luxuries became readily available. And then we meet Amos. If John the Baptist was a voice crying in the wilderness, Amos was a voice of obnoxious annoyance – a voice that scraped like fingernails on a chalk board. Amos spoke just a bit bluntly, and with the syntax of a farmer. He called the socialites “cows.” (4:1) He was just a shepherd, among the poorest of professions. He despised luxury. He kind of reminds me of my father in that regard. My Dad grew up on a farm in South Dakota during the Depression. I remember his outrage at our nephew's extravagant wedding reception.

But unlike my Dad, who graduated from seminary and served for decades as a parish pastor, Amos was an amateur. He was no professional prophet, making his living talking about God. And that's where he gets into trouble, especially when we meet him today. Amos is meeting with Amaziah, who *was* a paid, professional court priest – a minister to the King.

So we have the two “A's” – Amos and Amaziah. Amos the amateur, Amaziah the professional. Amos the prophet, Amaziah the priest. The two men are not getting along very well. Amos the amateur prophet was not only a poor herdsman, he was a foreigner from the south - from Tekoa, a small town in Judah. You see, Israel had split from the south about 170 years before. Israelite leaders did not take kindly to criticism from a southerner. But social acceptance didn't matter to Amos. God had called Amos to leave his job and carry a message. God said “Go,” and Amos obeyed.

The people Amos is talking to had plenty of “religion.” They worshipped regularly at shrines. But Amos brought unexpected bad news from God: “I hate, I despise your festivals” (5:21). God didn't want sacrifice or singing. God demanded justice. Amos saw oppression of the poor, dishonest business bribery in court, privilege bought with money. He could easily have focused on the corrupt religious system which centered on two calf-idols. He focused instead on what we might call political issues. Amos announced God's judgment for crimes against humanity.

We like to pretend that we can maintain an absolute separation between religious and political matters. Today our texts invite us to ask, “What does the Bible have to say about politics and religion?” “What do the biblical prophets have to say to us about the church's role in public discourse?”

If we let just today's readings provide a response to the questions, we hear at least a couple of things: First, people who speak genuinely prophetic words are often judged to be dangerous – especially by established political and religious institutions. Amos tells what he sees when God holds up the plumb line of justice next to Israel -- that the poor are being trampled. So Amos speaks against the king. The priest Amaziah, who works *FOR* the king, tells Amos, in effect, “Get lost! Go back to your own country and say anything you want. But don't say it here. Don't disrupt my cushy life. Amaziah is all about maintaining, and justifying, the status quo. And, in case you were wondering, Amaziah is not the hero here. Amos is. Amos is answerable to no one but God.

In our Gospel, John is imprisoned because he challenged an illicit marriage in the powerful family of the Herods. The beheading of John the Baptist, in the context of Mark's gospel, foreshadows Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus challenged established political and religious institutions too. People who speak truth to the abuse of power will suffer. That is a central theme in the Gospel of Mark.

The second thing today's lessons teach us about politics and religion has to do with power. Politics is necessary and unavoidable. Where there are people, there will be politics. Anyone ever heard of “*church* politics”? And religion is also necessary and unavoidable. We are *made* to connect with the divine in community. That's how we're wired. But, as I'm sure you've heard before, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That's the issue in the book of Amos. Amaziah defends King Jeroboam's absolute power. After all, he benefits directly from it. And Amos has an issue with that. When Herod beheads John the Baptist, Herod abuses *his* absolute power to please his daughter, who is trying to please her mother. With deadly consequences. And we should *all* have an issue with that.

Eugene Peterson is a pastor who translated the Bible into common everyday language. He calls it *The Message*. He writes this in his introduction to the book of Amos: *More people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way. Sex, money and power all take a back seat to religion as a source of evil. Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to humankind. The moment a person (or government or religion or organization) is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or project, anything goes. The history, worldwide, of religion-fueled hate, killing, and oppression is staggering. The Biblical prophets are in the front line of those doing something about it.*

The Biblical prophets continue to be the most powerful and effective voices ever heard on this earth for keeping religion honest, humble, and compassionate. Prophets sniff out injustice, especially injustice that is dressed up in religious garb. They sniff it out a mile away. Prophets see through hypocrisy, especially hypocrisy that assumes a religious pose. Prophets are not impressed by position or power or authority. They aren't taken in by numbers, size, or appearances of success.

In the book of Amos, chapter 5, God says, “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (5:23-24) Herod was afraid. He feared that Jesus was John returned from the dead. That the one Herod beheaded had come back in Jesus to haunt him. There may be some *hope* in that fear. Hope for the oppressed: that all the prophets killed through the ages *are* alive in Jesus. The church is called to witness to justice in company with them.ⁱⁱ

We join them today, in fact, at a banquet table. Not the banquet table of the corrupt Herod, but at the banquet table of our Lord Jesus. This is a banquet where God erases the boundaries of time and space and politics and religion. Here we join the prophets of all times and places who strive, as the Baptismal Covenant says, who “strive for justice and peace among all people, and [who] respect the dignity of every human being.”ⁱⁱⁱ That’s the plumb line for this church. Amos speaks among us today to help keep our religion honest, humble, and compassionate. Like Jesus. I think that’s what Barry’s politics does for my religion. And I’d like to think that’s what my religion does for Barry’s politics. When our religion is honest, humble, and compassionate, our politics will be too.

Pastor Dana Runestad

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ⁱ Introduction to Amos in “Study Bible: The New Student Bible NRSV,” Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, p. 924.

ⁱⁱ John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton, [KCVO DL](#) (10 January 1834 – 19 June 1902), was an [English Catholic](#) historian, politician, and writer. He was the only son of [Sir Ferdinand Dalberg-Acton, 7th Baronet](#),^{iv} and a grandson of the [Neapolitan](#) admiral [Sir John Acton, 6th Baronet](#).^v Between 1837 and 1869 he was known as Sir John Dalberg-Acton, 8th Baronet. (Wikipedia)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Sundays and Seasons](#), Year B 2018, Augsburg Fortress, p. 224

^{iv} Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer, Rite of Holy Baptism, p. 305