

ON CON-DAMNING

“Outrage after outrage!” That’s what I reported about Amos. He *condamned*, I wrote. Oops... Spell-check corrected me. I meant to say... “*condemned*.” But my oops is closer to the real Amos. He was “*condamning*.”

Amos’ living was not tied to the popularity of his preaching. He could come to town, say his say, until he was driven away, beaten and stoned as he went. No matter, he didn’t have to win members or fill pews or raise a budget or try to keep everyone happy.

Speaking of *condamning* I thought of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, minister of the South Chicago United Church of Christ. Wright was a well-educated liberal Christian preacher. His church was a spiritual beacon. The Obama’s were members.

When Barack Obama began his campaign for the Presidential nomination, opponents did what is commonly done these days. They looked back through any materials that might be used against an opponent. One of the things they did was go through 20 years of Dr. Wright’s sermons. They found a sermon with the words “*God damn America*.”

I read some of the context of that one sermon. It was prophetic preaching in the biblical tradition. Wright was specifically calling out ways in which the nation and church were not in line with God. It reminded me of the first chapters of Amos. Very *condamning*.

No one knows whether Obama heard that sermon, but the fact that his pastor once said those words filled the news. Wright wasn’t fired, but sadly (in my opinion) the conservative outcry made it politically necessary for Obama to withdraw from that church and disavow belief in Wright’s preaching. Jeremiah Wright’s approval rating among the general public fell below 10%. That’s probably about average for prophets.

Another who spoke *condamning* language was named Jesus. We rarely read Matthew’s chapter 23. Read Matthew 23 where Jesus is declaring a series of “Woes.” Some translators say that the original word should be *damn*, not *woe*. *

Read it out loud with a bit of anger. “*You scholars and Pharisees, imposters! Damn you!*” It’s little wonder that he met the fate of a prophet. Jesus thought like a prophet, talked like a prophet, and acted like a prophet. Matthew has him say, as Jesus and friends walked toward Jerusalem for that last time:

“*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you murder the prophets and stone those who are sent to you*”)Matthew 23:37

So, yes, Amos is a prophet. He *condamns*. Aren’t there times you feel that way too?

“*When the Lord God speaks, who can fail to prophesy?*” Art Morgan, March 18, 2017

*See THE FIVE GOSPELS The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus (Matthew 23) Jesus Seminar 1993.

(I just looked at the fly-page hand-written inscription: “To Art, With All Good Wishes from a fellow at the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg)

(A slight confession:

First, Amos is not simple reading or thinking. He ties God to all nature, both wonder and horror. It’s why some people don’t like the Old Testament or its idea about God. Is Amos wrong? Can humans and their history be separated from nature? Or is “God” a name for the Operating System of the universe, a Verb instead of a Noun, in which “God” is in whatever happens, good and evil?

Second, Amos was the earliest book included in the Old Testament. Jesus would probably have heard it read along with other Prophets and the Torah in his synagogue 750 years later. The translation I am using is from the Hebrew by J.B. Phillips, “*The Four Prophets*.” Other translations come from the Greek which both mis-translated some passages and softened the language in others. Phillips retains original poetic style.

Third, a most helpful resource for me is R.B.Y. Scott, “*The Relevance of the Prophets*.”)

