

## **Starting Over**

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno, July 15, 2018  
based on Amos 7:7-17*

Amos did not begin life as a prophet. No one ever does. No genuine prophet wants to be one. It's too painful. Real prophets are full of empathy for the people they are called by God to criticize. They don't enjoy delivering bad news. They hate it. That's the way you can identify a genuine prophet from a garden variety curmudgeon. Curmudgeons live to be negative. Not a prophet.

Well, Amos had led a quiet, rural, uneventful life, as far as we know. He was a sheep rancher in an out of the way zip-code called, Tekoa. He received his calling, like other prophets, through a rising inner-anger about how the poor in the world were getting the shaft.

But that wasn't all. Anybody can feel indignant. But Amos also had a nagging malaise about a change he believed the whole earth was going through. He sensed that what people counted on continuing forever was, instead, coming to a halt.

Here is how he phrased it:

"The pastures of the shepherds are withering, the top of Mt. Carmel is drying up."

He claims that this is not just the usual periodic climate shift. Widespread injustice is occurring and it's messing with the earth, and Amos thinks God is angry about that, too. Amos sees signs of this everywhere, but everyone else seems to be inured to it.

"Does a lion roar in the forest if it has no prey," Amos wonders? Does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it?" There's injustice everywhere, says Amos, and don't think God is not paying attention.

But hey, even when thousands of innocent children were being held hostage in cages by our government the majority of people weren't paying much attention. Most people just shut that stuff out.

The late theologian, James McClendon, has said, "What is the word Americans love most to hear? It's not "Let's have justice." No, it's something about the next new superstar."

McClendon notes how we love to hear about athletes who soar to the top of their sport, about start-ups that quickly drive their competitors to the wall, about entertainers who were so successful that even if they die young, their fans believe social media posts that claim their death was really a hoax.

Well, I'll confess that I'm more than a little impressed with the Shohei Ohtani of the LA Angels, the ALL-Star pitcher who is also an All-Star hitter. Whoever heard of a pitcher

who led the league in homeruns. Well – that only happened once – with Babe Ruth but he'd given up pitching by the time of the first All-Star game in 1933.

Since Horatio Alger, Americans have always had love affairs with people who have few resources but abundant promise; people who overcome all odds to rise to the top of whatever mountain they seek to climb.

Yet, McClendon points out that such stories are very much at odds with the typical Bible story. The typical Bible story is about failure – it's about failure because the typical Bible story is *not* about manifest destiny or human ambition; it's about God's plans and how they go awry because humans are so ... human.

The Bible is a long chronicle of God's failures. And yet, after every failure, the Bible tells another story of how God starts over again; stories about God refusing to give up with the likes of us. God is never stumped by our hard-heartedness.

God's decision to start over is mirrored in the choice Amos the prophet makes to start over in mid-life, leaving behind his life as a shepherd and sometime tree pruner to address the nation of Israel.

Amos isn't introduced as anyone special. Nothing about his previous training or experience suggests that he is going to be an effective speaker, let alone a spokesperson for God.

When the nation of Israel was broken-in-two some 2800 years ago, and Amos migrated from the southern kingdom to the northern one in order to deliver a message God had in mind for these no accounts. Well, the northerners were not exactly impressed by this hick vinedresser from Tekoa.

It would be like someone from Drain, or Coquille coming up here to Portland, addressing people in the echoey marble foyer of the Main downtown Library. He'd stand there yelling, taking the leadership of the city apart verbally, and the patrons would just ignore him, write him off as one of the deranged rabble. One of the staff there would just call the police to come and quietly take him away.

In fact, Amos was thrown out of town by a coalition of religious and political leaders. Well, he is in good company when it comes to Biblical prophets. The more quickly they are dismissed, the longer they seem to be remembered.

Amos protested that he was no one special. Nor was he the son of anyone notable. He was just who he was, a humble herdsman. But, you know, it's his plainspokenness and candor that makes him worth listening to.

Today he'd say that you wouldn't need a PhD in sociology to figure out something was not right in the land in his day.

The nation had split in two a few years before and the split hadn't solved anything. In both countries, north and south, the poor were still being made into slaves and the rich were acting as if they were entitled to their free labor.

All that being true, I wonder if the reason Amos did what he did had more to do with something going on inside Amos himself than all there was to be angry about in the nation.

I mean, look, over 8000 people went to great trouble and expense to go to the Capitol in D.C. on January 6<sup>th</sup> in response to a ridiculous lie, and when you hear their stories you can't help but see that every one of them had some issue going in inside him or her – it may be about their parents' alcoholism, or a loss of a career in the woods or the mines, or some abuse they'd suffered some time before. Or it may have been something they felt bad about having done sometime long ago, something they still can't deal with, so they've thrown themselves into a lost cause.

But ask them about it and they say they truly believe they were there to save the country or the world. This kind of thing happens whatever the cause, be it right wing or left.

Listen to this first person story from Patricia Abreu of San Jose:

***FOR THE PAST*** several years, I have volunteered at the Wildlife Center of Silicon Valley, giving orphaned and injured wildlife a second chance. We once returned a great horned owl to the location where she'd been found hurt, and her mate was there to greet her. We reunited a fawn with his mother. We brought a young western gray squirrel back to the tree that he had fallen from when only weeks old.

*It is demanding work — both physically and emotionally. Many animals do not make it. They come in too injured, too emaciated, already dying. Most of the time these animals are hurt because of human beings: our cars, our encroachment on their habitat, our cats and dogs, our trimming of trees.*

*I used to tell myself I do this because I love animals. After a few years of working here, however, I see that my motives are not solely altruistic. Acts of service are good for the soul. The life I am trying to save is my own.*

Perhaps Amos was not so much trying to save the world, as himself. Maybe he decided to leave his old life and start over for personal reasons. Maybe it had to do with something about his father, his upbringing, his lousy luck with women, his sexual orientation. I mean, who knows? ... Who knows why he walked away from everything he owned and loved and took up a prophet's life?

Harry Truman is a great example of starting over, taking up a life of public service. He was often called a failed haberdasher. “How could a failed haberdasher become a successful president?” was a question often asked.

What amuses me about his story is that, of all people, his mother-in-law was someone who habitually said disparaging things about him. She always believed that her daughter could have done better in the husband-department than Harry Truman.

Even when she lived in the White House with her daughter and her daughter’s husband, *President* Truman, she felt there had been some mistake. Of course, that helped Harry Truman to never have a swelled head.

I mean, he knew how he had become president. He was always very self-effacing. Even people who were critical of him liked that about him. He was candid about having been a failed haberdasher. Unlike his predecessor, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman was plainspoken, as plainspoken as the prophet Amos. And many people warmed to it.

Have you ever had to start over; do something entirely new? In 2007 I tried to. Nothing was wrong. The church I was pastoring at the time in Ashland was doing fine. But I’d been pastoring for 27 years and I thought maybe I had done everything I could do in the ministry. I was looking to either teach or work in Alumni relations at SOU where I was an adjunct.

People took my applications seriously, but in every case I lacked the credentials of the experience 9 out of 10 of the other applicants had, so my efforts went nowhere.

Finally, when an opportunity presented itself for me to move laterally (to another church) I was ready to consider that. And what I found out was this – that doing the same thing in a new place can be a way to hit the refresh button – especially after having done that thing for 14 years in one place. Ashland is a lovely town, but I’d grown stale and, at the time, I needed a new challenge.

Well, we all need a change once in a while. The meter is running on everything. But, looking back, I am so glad I *didn’t* get one of those jobs I’d applied for. Once I got into a new church I quickly realized that I hadn’t done everything I could do as a pastor. My sell-by date for a single church just happened to be about 14 years. I wasn’t done as a minister, tho. Not by a long shot.

You know how they say, “things take eight times longer to happen than you guess?” Well, that’s a good thing. It’s built in to the system. We’re not designed to jump out of what we are doing every time we get a little restless. If we did we’d never finish the work we are intended to do where we get planted.

Listen to this helpful cautionary tale from a woman named Brianne Hogan ...

*We all dream of leaving our old life behind in order to create something new. I get it. In fact, I'm living it. Six months ago I packed my red Volkswagen Beetle with my earthly possessions, including a temperamental black cat, and moved from Toronto to Prince Edward Island. I didn't know anyone there. I didn't move for a job or a lover. No, I moved for excitement, change and adventure.*

*I had never planned to move from Pickering, my hometown outside of Toronto, where I'd settled after the wanderings of my 20s. I had a routine, I had a boxing gym, I had a life. I lived near my parents and my nearest and dearest friends.*

*But after a month spent in Charlottetown a couple of summers ago, I fell in love with Prince Edward Island. I fell in love with its slower pace. I fell in love with its serene scenery, its shimmering waves and rolling green hills. More specifically, I fell in love with the person I was on the island. I felt more in touch with myself than I had in the variety of cities I had called home (Florence, New York, Vancouver, Toronto) over the years. PEI seemed to fit with the current embodiment of who I wanted to be: organic, expansive and free.*

*I returned from my trip and told my friends that, one day, I wanted to move there. At the time, that day seemed so far away, but in reality it came only 15 months later.*

*As a single freelance writer whose only dependent was a moody cat — and as someone who's pretty good at saving — I was in a primo position to make such a huge transition happen.*

*So I packed up everything I owned, hired a moving truck and planned the 18-hour drive that would take me and the cat across four provinces. And over 1,000 miles later, as I crossed the Confederation Bridge, I knew my life would never be the same. In fact, I knew my life had just begun. Fin.*

*Just kidding. While the above is all technically true, let's get real about what it means to fully embody the meme fantasy of running away to start a new life from scratch. Because, though it sounds really romantic and cinematic, starting over in a new place is hard work.*

*First of all, you don't know anyone. Like, no one. Before you say "That sounds like heaven!" let's acknowledge that humans need contact. Loneliness has been proved to be as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Factor in the well-known reality that making friends as an adult is dang difficult — especially for someone like me*

*who freelances from home — it's no wonder that I opted to befriend a group of outdoor cats for some kind ... of connection.*

*Despite that innate belief that I am where I'm meant to be, I've had dreams about fleeing back to Toronto. Was my craving for change really worth the price of gut-wrenching homesickness and all-consuming loneliness? Did the beautiful surroundings, like the ocean outside of my kitchen window and the rolling Anne of Green Gables hills, make up for the creature comforts of my hometown?*

*Moving to a new city means a complete restructuring of your life, and that is hard. It means joining new gyms and clubs, and awkwardly asking acquaintances out for coffee even if you're nervous as heck. It means staying home alone for many nights, watching reruns of "Friends" for the umpteenth time, while seeing your real friends on Facebook post pictures of fun nights out.*

*That squeaky new feeling of being somewhere "different" quickly wore off, leaving me with a sense of confusion and a constant feeling of, "What do I do now?" I can't count how many times I thought to myself, "I've made a huge mistake." I constantly visualized myself packing up and driving back to Toronto. Back to what felt safe and comfortable.*

*I haven't — but here's the most important thing about moving to a new place: You can't outrun your crap.*

I wonder if Amos realized that. Well, I guess it's not important. What's important is that **we** know it. What is important, critically important, is if we know what is underneath our impulses to do anything. Especially any BIG thing.

There are healthy reasons to want a change, and there are unhealthy reasons. It takes a lot of self-knowledge to figure it all out.

That said, people **can** start over. Sometimes it can be the most important thing one ever does. (guided meditation) ...

So, what impulses are playing with you, playing with your heart? Are you feeling a possible call to save the world? Some people are. Where is that coming from?

Is that malaise or anger you feel giving you energy to do something good, or is it simmering because of some unresolved business that is personal?

Is God calling you to reorder your world, or maybe yourself? These are all worthy questions. Amen.