

“To Begin Again”

Christian discipleship ... many things can be said about Christian discipleship and people have tried through numerous books, conferences, and sermons. In fact, paraded on religious radio and TV programs are the A-B-C formulas on how to become a disciple. These are unfortunate because Jesus makes one fact perfectly clear. Those who answer his call to follow are warned that discipleship is not easy. Discipleship is not easy because the tasks that Jesus would have us do ... the principles that Jesus would have us abide by ... the code of conduct that Jesus would have us live ... are on a high plain. Another thing that can be said about discipleship is that God calls upon ordinary people to do extraordinary work on His behalf, which is why I seriously believe that the fate of Christian ministry today lies not in the hands of paid professionals like myself, but in the hands, the eyes, the feet, and the voice of ordinary believers sitting in the pews like yourselves.

The lesson from Amos is a fine example of what I am saying. The book of Amos records the story of God speaking and working through an ordinary farmer ... sending this simple soul from southern Judah ... north to Israel to speak His judgment ... a message that conflicts with the government's own temple priest. The relationship that the Israelites had with God is plumb out of line! Indeed, it is so out of kilter that it may be beyond repair and everything may have to be torn down. The social and religious situation is critical ... hope is waning. The question is not one of making minor repairs ... the question is whether or not God will simply throw up His hands and start all over. Amos is Israel's last chance. The Lord is judging Israel and has called Amos ... a farmer ... to deliver the words of judgment. Amos has no good news ... there is no gospel message!

Right now you may be thinking: “Oh, great! Pastor Merritt is going to preach a downer of a sermon!” Possibly! I once read that *authentic ministry ought to comfort the afflicted ... but also afflict the comfortable*. Taken together ... the biographic material and the reported visions recorded in Amos ... the book encourages the people of God to look critically at both their society and the established religion ... and to ground / root that criticism in the Word of God. Like the Israelites in today's lesson, who were enjoying a prosperous time and comfortable living ... we, too, would like our lives to proceed in an orderly uninterrupted fashion. But that's not reality! Life, as we experience it, is full of endings and beginnings. Hopefully, through the eyes of faith, these special occasions can be seen as interventions from God ... gracious opportunities to start over.

For instance, today's lessons present a “crisis of decision.” In Amos, as well as in Luke, we learn of two ways that people avoid hearing the Word of God when that Word calls them to such a crisis. The first is the stark rejection of God's Word exemplified by King Jeroboam, whose attitude is fixed in expressions like: “I don't have to listen, if I don't want to.” True enough, BUT covering one's ears is obviously a very temporary solution.

The second instance is the lawyer who encounters Jesus. He's more subtle. He finds that *theology* offers a way out --- the word (message) needs to be interpreted (spun), and if one is creative, it can be interpreted in ways that render the “crisis of decision” unnecessary. However, Jesus insists that Scripture be interpreted from God's perspective and not shaped or spun to one's own liking!

For a brief moment, let us walk in Amos' shoes. Amos is an unlikely prophet. His call reminds us of many other vocation stories in Scripture in which the one being called protests that he or she is not the right one to be called (Jonah). Amos is called to proclaim a tough word to Israel. He is ordered to go to the king and accuse, condemn, and call to task. Amos did not begin life as a prophet. For the most part, Amos led a quiet, uneventful life as one of the sheep farmers of Tekoa.

Over time, he received his orders in visions about Israel during the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah, and Jeroboam I and II, kings of Israel, two years before the earthquake. We read in the first chapter: *The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up*. Then in the third chapter: *Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment? Does a lion roar in the forest if it has not prey? Does a young lion cry out from its den, if it has caught nothing? ... Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? Does disaster befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?*

The Bible is about God. And God in the Bible seems to lose more times than win. The Bible is a long record of failures. And yet, after each failure, the Bible is more importantly a record of God starting over. God does not give up! God is not perplexed by our sin and rebellion. Many times God starts over with us. And so Amos embodies God's determination not to give up on Israel; God's willingness to talk to His people; God's graciousness to return to them and bless them.

Take notice that Amos is introduced as nobody very special ... nobody who's previous training or talents suggest that he would be an effective spokesperson for God. Amos is introduced as one of the sheep farmers of Tekoa. Tekoa is a hick town a little southeast of Jerusalem. In others words, Amos is a country bumpkin who perhaps had never even been to the big city of Jerusalem. Also, Amos sometimes is a tender of trees in his orchard. However, God calls him to leave his sheep and orchard, and

go and preach to people not his kind. Amos is called to start his life all over. At first, he protests that he is the wrong person for the job. He has no training as a prophet. But the one thing Amos does have ... is faith and trust in God's wisdom.

Sometimes, when God uproots us and asks us to start over, God may see gifts in us for the challenges of a new situation that we don't see in ourselves. Amos found out that some of the things he learned from being a shepherd and a farmer could be useful. One thing he learned was the importance of straight-forward, common speech. Amos doesn't use fancy words. He talks just like one would expect a no-nonsense farmer to talk. Amos urges people to draw upon their own experience, in order to read "the signs of the times." Amos challenges them to take a real hard look at what is going on in the world, and to stop denying that all is well ... just because there is prosperity in the land.

Our country is in trouble. That feeling we have in the pit of our stomachs is an uneasy message that is telling us we are on the wrong path ... socially, economically, politically, environmentally, and spiritually. We have a serious crisis of leadership that transcends political parties, as well as their spun political rhetoric. When 75% of a nation's people express no confidence in the executive and legislative branches of government, there is a major constitutional crisis. In most countries in the world, such disapproval would lead to riots, civil disobedience, and coups. But we are not uncomfortable enough ... yet! This is why we need Divine intervention. We need an Amos to address the king. We need the people of this great country to get serious about the "signs of the times." We need conservatives to be less conservative and we need liberals to be less liberal. We need leaders with vision for the greater good of this nation and not leaders with big pockets for special interests ... nor does this wonderful country need more myopic talking heads who are at best, ignorant and at worse, evil. And we need Paris Hilton to just GO AWAY!

Life is full of endings and beginnings. This is one of those historical times when some things need to end and new beginnings need to happen. And as difficult and as challenging as change is ... endings and beginnings are the real stuff of life! For instance, take marriage in which two people madly in love promise to live together "until death do us part." But then there is a crisis of some kind ... some "big surprise," and people are parted by something other than death. Starting over is not easy, but it is necessary!

There are times when God somehow takes what for us seems like an unmitigated disaster ... and turns it into a gracious gain. The story of starting over could be told of most of us here. The fancy name for starting over is "conversion" / "seeing the light!" For most of us, conversion doesn't just mean *starting* ... it truly means *starting over*. Far too often, we think that a conversion is a one time event when we get our whole life all together ... but that "all" never really happens ... it's more like a piece here and a piece there.

Conversion / starting over ... like what is pictured in the Amos lesson ... may not be the answer to all our problems. Indeed, it may be the very beginning of newer problems. But as painful, challenging, and frightening as starting over may be ... to begin again, as Amos discovered, may well be related to God's "disruptive determination" to use us for His purposes. For instance, anyone approaching the Bible must be willing to be shocked, because the Bible doesn't ask us to agree. The Bible places demands upon us. The Bible asks not for agreement ... it asks for change ... for the reorientation of our lives. Therefore, to understand the Bible on the Bible's own terms ... we must be prepared for the possibility of starting over.

Dag Hammarskjöld, a UN leader in the '50s, gives this account of his own turning toward faith: *I don't know who -- or what -- put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone -- or Something -- and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender, has a goal. From that moment I have known what it means not to look back, and to take no thought for the morrow.*

When you face those times in life ... times when you are asked to bring one aspect of your life to an end and to begin again, remember Amos. For the same God who began the world ... the same God who speaks to us through prophets like Amos ... the same God who comes to us in the risen Christ ... is the same God who gives us the grace to begin again ... to start over ... and over ... and over ... And is the same God who brought people from all over the world to the shores of this land and endowed them "with certain unalienable rights, that among them are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Certainly, we would like our lives to proceed in an orderly, uninterrupted, comfortable fashion. But the reality is ... life is full of stops and starts ... endings and beginnings. I believe through the eyes of faith ... these occasions ... these historical moments ... can be viewed as gracious acts of God!

Let us pray: Gracious God, You are Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. You are the Creator of worlds, the One who brings life out of death, creation out of chaos, light out of darkness. Holy God, You lead us through changes of life, changes that are sometimes difficult for us. Change requires us to let go of something, and sometimes the loss can be painful. Change requires us to enter a new world, a world whose newness sometimes threatens us. Give us the faith, O Lord, to know that You go with us, through all of life's transitions. Give us the grace to see that our beginnings and endings are also opportunities for a closer walk with You. Enable us to start over, not on our own, but by Your grace. Lord of Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, we offer this our prayer to You. **Amen.**