

The most memorable piece of wisdom my grandfather ever gave me was this: “the way you do anything is the way you’ll do everything.” In other words, our everyday habits and practices set the tone for our entire lives. This wasn’t some abstract philosophy. It was life experience. See, before he was a pastor, my grandfather was a postman. He was a mail carrier, and he delivered mail all over the city of Detroit. My grandfather knew his route like the back of his hand. He got to know the people at each address. He made his rounds in the scorching heat and the bitter cold, the pouring rain and the icy wind. He was a model of consistency. The habits he learned in the post office became the principles he applied in the pulpit. A change in status did not change his character. His life proved to me that a title means less than your trajectory.

In our text today, the strange thing about our friend Amos is that the title he refuses is the very thing he’s remembered as – a prophet. Let me be clear: Amos isn’t lying. He is neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. And yet, for the better part of 9 chapters, he sounds a lot like one. But Amos never calls himself a prophet; Amaziah *the high priest* calls him a prophet. If Amos isn’t a prophet, what is he?

Well, Amos already **has** a day job. He is a keeper of flocks and a dresser of trees, otherwise known as a shepherd and a gardener. I’ve never been a shepherd **or** a gardener, but I know animals requires daily care and gardens require consistent attention. I know shepherds smell like their flocks and gardeners get their hands dirty. The work of the shepherd and the gardener means getting up early and shutting down late. It’s the kind of work that reorients your rhythms of life and requires you to give your full time and energy to sustaining life. Amos is in the agriculture business. It’s hard work. It’s demanding work. It’s **everyday** work.

Everyday work produces everyday habits. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called it habitus. Habitus is the way our society gets deposited into us. Our situation in life shapes our disposition, our capacities, our ways of thinking and feeling and acting. When our agency intersects with the structures of our world, power is produced. Amos’ daily life is **structured** by the work of agriculture. He exercises his **agency** to do his work within that **structure**. Amos is not **consciously** preparing to be a prophet; he’s **unconsciously** learning how to carry power.

Amos says God took him from following his flock. Amos didn’t go looking for something. He already **had** something and already **was** somebody. God takes Amos to his new assignment. Nothing suggests Amos became a different person because of his assignment. He already is who he is. And who he **is**, is the product of his everyday habits.

The same is true for Amaziah. Amaziah is the high priest of Bethel. He sits at the intersection of the social, religious, and political life of Israel. But he also serves under King Jeroboam II. The reign of King Jeroboam was long and peaceful. It was a

prosperous time for the upper class. Things are not perfect, but they seem to be stable. If things are pretty stable and secure at your job, chances are you don't want to rock the boat. If anything, you're more likely to maintain the status quo. Amaziah has been shaped for management and maintenance. He claims his power through order and organization, through rules and regulation. The less things change, the better.

Amos is a threat because he's the antithesis of Amaziah. He's critical of the religious culture that Amaziah represents. He predicts the fall of the political regime that gives Amaziah authority. From Amaziah's perspective, Amos is committing treason. Now, Amaziah doesn't really **know** Amos; he just knows what he **heard**. And everything he **heard** is disruptive to his **own** work. Amaziah is thinking about systems and structures. He's thinking about damage control. Amaziah is loyal to the kingdom, but Amos is loyal to a way of life.

Sometimes, the high priest is the last person to recognize what God is doing. Maybe it's because status and privilege can condition us to mischaracterize the morally righteous as merely religious. This is the critical conflict between Amos and Amaziah. Amaziah can only categorize Amos by the limits of his experience. In his mind, Amos is just another prophet for hire. Which means as long as he can define his role, he can limit his influence. But the ability to categorize people does not equate to the ability to confer power.

Amos is not just refusing a title; he's critiquing a false consciousness. He is subverting the idea that who he is and what he does can be contained by the limits of an institutional imagination. I have enough degrees from Yale to know that institutions are ultimately less concerned with your opinions and more concerned with their survival. Institutions do not **love** you. They will **tolerate** you as long as what you do does not disrupt their function. But the function of prophesy is **precisely** disruption. It's pulling back the curtain on our perception of reality to reveal what's in the background. Which means the most prophetic thing Amos does might be refusing the definition entirely. Because Amos doesn't lean on a title; he points to his track record. Amos doesn't show his credentials, he just shows his work.

If our titles and credentials disappeared today, what would our **work** say? Because it occurs to me that God called Amos when he was **already** doing work. Dr. Emilie Townes said it well: "it's what we do every day that shapes us and says more about us than those grand moments of righteous indignation." The everyday gets overlooked when we fixate on the extraordinary. We celebrate public work while neglecting private practice. We sharpen our prophetic fury but neglect a prophetic faith. We rejoice in prophetic critique but shrug at prophetic consecration. We search for prophetic controversy but ignore prophetic constraint. Everybody's a prophet but ain't nobody prophetic.

Prophetic. Prophetic. Prophetic.

The more I hear it and the more people say it, it sounds like tinkling cymbals and sounding brass.

And all we're doing is making noise but not changing a thing.

We got all the posture but none of the power. Everybody wanna preach but don't nobody wanna study. Everybody wanna talk but don't nobody wanna tarry.

I'm so glad that the life of Amos is made not by public recognition but by personal commitment. Because there are some things you only learn when you tend the flocks and till the fields. The power of the prophet is gathered in the unseen labor. Maybe instead of searching for the next somebody, we need to ask is there anybody with the courage to say, I ain't no prophet, I just do the work.

Listen, it's lovely to be back at my alma mater. It's nice to get an invite. But understand that your calling is not contingent on institutional honor. In fact, the measure of your ministry might not be in the invitations you receive, but in the ones you refuse. I know capitalism constrains us to earn a paycheck, but we are not prophets for hire. Amos reminds us that sometimes, you gotta remember your day job. You gotta remember that what made you is what will sustain you when the words God gives you get too heavy for the folks who can't control you.

I wonder if we have any non-prophets in the house

People who are willing to say

I ain't no prophet...but I speak truth to power.

I ain't no prophet...but I feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

I ain't no prophet...but I defend the rights of the vulnerable.

I ain't no prophet...but I pray *and* I move my feet at the same time.

I ain't no prophet...but I try to walk worthy, my calling to fulfill.

I ain't no prophet...but I live in the everydayness of my moral calculus

I ain't no prophet...but I speak what I know and testify to what I've seen.

Where are the non-prophets? Where have they gone?

Perhaps they didn't go anywhere. Maybe they're still in the fields. Maybe they're still among the flocks.

Maybe the way they do anything is the way they'll do everything, so what in the world are **we** going to do?

But don't take my word for it: I ain't no prophet.