

**July 10, 2016**

**Scripture Lesson**

*Psalm 25:1,4-22*

**Sermon** "*The Call to Start Over*"

Amos 7:7-17

Today's text is taken from the prophet Amos and includes his call to be a prophet. An unlikely prophet, Amos is. 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!

Amos is called to proclaim a tough word to Israel. He is ordered to go to the king and accuse, condemn call to task.

Remember in the Gospel story that Jesus tell the rich young man to start over; to give away all that his has; and follow. We can only get but it seems that cost for that young man was too great. He walks away from Jesus.

Today, let us interpret Amos as an example of someone called by God to start over, to begin again. In Amos, we shall see some of our own misgivings on such occasions. Yet we shall also proclaim the gracious truth that endings and beginnings, starting over, are not just hazards of life, but also opportunities to hear the voice of God calling us into God's service to the world.

People have often asked me about my own call; how it was that I was called to the ministry.. I said there are two stories. Officially, as you know, I used to be a farmer and I tell the story that one day I was standing out in the field and I looked out, I saw a cloud that was shaped like a P. I looked over here and I saw another cloud and it was shaped like a C and I thought I am being called to preach Christ. But after a number of years in the ministry, I wondered if that meant I was to plant corn. So how did I come to that conclusion that I was called to the ministry. I found I was preparing myself for it . I reading a lot of theology and Christian history and I felt like I didn't want to farm the rest of my life. So I went to seminary. But I also think that people are sometimes confused about calls. Sometimes people believe they have a call from God and how does that call work. I think there are two kinds of calls. I really believe that when a person is called, they need both calls. One is that Inner Call and that God is speaking, "You need to do this" whatever it is in Christian Service. The other is the Outer Call. My outer call came when we did not have a minister in our church and sometimes they would call on me to preach and people would say, "Allen, you really ought to consider the ministry." So that was the outer call. The spirit of other people telling me that this is something that I should consider. I should consider if I felt the inner call not that I should just run out and do what I

thought they wanted me to do. But if I felt the inner call, they were giving me the outer call.

### **Amos 7:7-17**

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’

And I said, ‘A plumb-line.’

Then the Lord said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.’

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.”’

And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.’

Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” ‘Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, “Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.” Therefore, thus says the LORD: “Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”’

Amos did not begin life as a prophet—who does? Amos led a quiet, uneventful life, for most of his life, as one of the sheep farmers of Tekoa. He received these words 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. He said, from 1:2, ‘The Lord oars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pasture of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.’

What words are they that we Americans most like to hear. It is the story of success. We like to hear about the poor child who works hard and becomes rich; we like to hear about athletes who soar to the top of their sports; about companies who by their ceaseless energies drove the competition out of the market, about pop singers who were so successful no one can believe they died---think Elvis! To be an American is above all is to win. Our favorite story is about some lad or lass

from some distant place who dreamed of coming to America, success land, the land of opportunity, a young person who scraped and saved until they finally did come to America, started as a dollar-an-hour dishwasher, worked scraped, began a business, say importing Mongolian goat hair, monopolized the goat-hair industry, made billions of dollars, and now lives in upscale La Jolla, making everybody happy by giving back a few paltry millions of those he had acquired. That, we are told, is the American dream.

Yet, this favorite American story is far from a favorite Bible story. The Bible rarely tells of anyone who got rich, successful or powerful.

The Bible is a long record of failures. And yet, after each failure, it is more importantly a record of God starting over. God didn't give up, God was not stumped by our sin and rebellion. God kept starting over with us. Amos embodies God's determination not to give up Israel, to keep talking to God's people, to keep returning to them and blessing them.

Ministers tell me that church is a place for starting over. Many a minister has found that when they move on from one church to another often they meet the same problems again. Financial problems, attendance problems, spiritual problems, and fellowship problems, The same battles are being fought and the same things have to be done. The people who stay in the churches for years also see the same problems, over and over again. Sometime we just get so tired with the problems that we say, "Lord, I'm so tired, in fact I'm too tired to start over on these problems again. Lord, you will have to get someone else to help you get started over again."

Amos was like that. Notice that Amos is introduced as nobody very special, nobody whose previous training or talents suggest that he would be an effective spokesperson of God. In chapter I, he was introduced as one of the sheep farmers of Tekoa. Tekoa was a hick town a little southeast of Jerusalem. In other words, Amos was a country bumpkin who perhaps had never even been to the big city of Jerusalem. When Israel was divided into two countries, the Northern and the Southern Kingdom, this southerner migrated to the north to preach. But they couldn't stand his preaching. He was thrown out of town by a coalition of religious and political leaders. Maybe the Bible is trying to say here that the more effective the prophet, the worse is his fate.

But for our purposes—it is enough that we see that Amos had to start over. He was a sheep farmer and sometime a tender of trees in his orchard. But he had to leave his sheep and his orchard and go preach to the northerners.

Of course, he didn't completely start over. I guess nobody does. Although Amos protested that he was the wrong person for the job of prophet, he was just a farmer, Amos trusted God's wisdom. Sometime, 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 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 good, straightforward, common speech.

In today's scripture, Amos doesn't use fancy words. He talks straight, just like one would expect a no-nonsense farmer to talk. He urges people to draw upon their own experiences in order to read the signs of the times. If you see two people, coming across town from different directions and they meet, embrace and walk together, you are correct in assuming that they probably had an appointment to meet. If you hear a lion roaring proudly in the bush, it is probably a sign that she has at last caught her prey.

In this way, Amos reminds you of Jesus, speaking similarly about signs of the times. If you see a fig tree in full blossom, you know that spring has come. Most congregations would be grateful for preachers who are able to use common, straightforward language to talk about God. Amos did that.

And yet, though Amos built upon his past experience, there is no denying that he did have to start over. And I can tell you, from what I have experienced and observed starting over is not easy.

You have a job, on the right career path, you have worked hard and expect to retire in 20 years from your company and then, reorganization, downsizing in the name of efficiency, and you are starting over.

You have a marriage, in which you promise to live together "until death do us part," and then you find that you and your spouse have drifted apart,....far apart, and like 'Humpty-Dumpty' the marriage cannot be put together again. And at mid-life, to your surprise, you are parted by something other than death. You have to start over.

I was talking together with some people about the foundation of the church from which I came out of. Alexander Campbell were two of our early leader. They both left the church of their youth, moved to America and started over on the American frontier leading a movement that consisted upon two points; restoration of the church and the unity of the church. Their influence brought about the Christian Church, (Disciples of Christ), the church of my ordination.

John Wesley was raised in England by his clergyman father in the Anglican faith. He served as a missionary to Georgia but was not very successful. He returned to England, depressed that his preaching had not won more souls. One night while worshipping at Aldersgate in England he said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed."....John Wesley started over. God touched him and through Wesley's preaching God won people to Christ. You should know that it is largely because of the work of John Wesley that we have today's Methodist Church.

We have deep within our Christian consciousness, a joy of stories like these, stories of people who experienced, not just the pain and the disruption of starting

over, but the grace, even the joy of starting over. There are those times when God somehow takes what for us seemed. Like an unmitigated disaster, a great loss, and turns it into gracious gain.

The story of starting over could be told for some of you here. We have a fancy name for starting over. It is called “conversion”; some call it “being born again.” For most of us. Conversion doesn’t mean just starting; more interestingly, for most of us it means starting over.

Too often, we have thought of conversion as a time when ,”When I get my life together”..when things take turn for the better for me. The story of Amos suggests that this is not saying nearly enough. Conversion, like what is pictured here, this starting over, may not be the answer to all my problems, indeed it may be the very beginning of problems I would never have had before God had decided to use me. The starting over may be painful, challenging, frightening. Yet this starting over is related to God’s disruptive determination to use me or to use you for God’s purposes.

So 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, I want you to remember; the same God who began the world, the God who came back to us after the flood and began creation again, the God who continually took us back, came back to us through prophets like Amos, returned to us in the risen Christ, this is the God who gives us the grace to begin again, to start over.