

**TO BEGIN AGAIN** - Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37  
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A Sermon By  
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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. During the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah, and Jeroboam I and II, kings of Israel, two years before the earthquake, he received these words about Israel in visions, *"The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up"* (Am 1:2).

*"Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment? Does a lion roar in the forest if it has no 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? "* (Am 3:3-6).

We Americans love success. We like to hear about people like Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey who started out with nothing and ended up on top of the world.

We love athletes who soar to the apex of their sport,

and companies that by their ceaseless energy drove their competitors to the wall.

To be an American is above all to win. Our favorite story is about some lad or lass in some distant place . . . who always dreamed of coming to America and who scraped and saved and finally did come to America, started as a dollar-an-hour dishwasher, worked, scraped, began a business importing Mongolian goat hair, monopolized the goat-hair industry, made billions of dollars, and now lives in retirement in Santa Monica, making everyone happy by giving back a few millions of those he had acquired. That, we are told, is the American dream.

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

I don't think any one would argue the fact that in the Bible we find few who get rich. The Bible talks little about succeeding. Ultimately, the Bible is a collection of books about God, and the God we meet in the Bible's books seems most of the time to lose, not win.

The Bible is a long record of failures. And yet, after each failure, we see a record of God beginning again.

God didn't give up, God was not stumped by our sin

and rebellion in Eden's garden. God kept starting over with us. Amos is but another example of God's determination not to give up on Israel, to keep talking to God's people, to keep returning to them and blessing them.

As a pastor, I have found that the church is a place for constantly beginning again.

Back in the early 1980's I served our presbytery as moderator of the Committee on Ministry, Pete Williams also served in that capacity. Among many things, as Pete could attest, the committee would often be sent to churches that had many problems. During my tenure as moderator of the Committee on Ministry, one such church had problems which culminated in the stormy departure of its pastor. When our committee arrived, we did our best to "rally the troops." One tired, exasperated elder told us, "I would like to be of help. But by my count, this is about the fourth time in my years at this church that presbytery's Committee on Ministry has come here and urged us to forget about the past, to launch out, to begin again. I am just too old to begin again. You will have to find somebody else to help you get started over."

The prophet Amos was like this. If you were to read all of Amos you would discover that he is nobody very special,

nobody whose previous training or talents suggest that he would be an effective spokesperson of God. He is introduced to us as one of the sheep farmers of Tekoa (Amos 1: 1).

Tekoa is 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, Amos, 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 (Am 7:10-13).

Here he is left out in the cold, out of the prophet business and faced with beginning again. He was a sheep farmer and sometime tender of trees in his orchard. But he left his sheep and his orchard to go preach to the Northerners. He failed. Time to begin again.

Of course, he didn't completely start over. I guess nobody does. Although Amos protested to God that he was the wrong person for the job of prophet, just a farmer, Amos ultimately trusted God's wisdom. Sometimes, when God uproots us and asks us to begin again, 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 good, straight- forward, common speech.

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 time.

If you see two people, coming across town from different corners 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 he has at last caught his prey.

If you hear trumpets blowing in the middle of the city, you should sit up and take notice.

In this way, Amos reminds us of Jesus, speaking similarly about signs of the times. If you see a fig tree in full blossom, you know that spring has come. Speaking plainly as in today's gospel on the Good Samaritan.

One of the greatest lessons I learned in seminary about preaching was: BE SIMPLE; IF YOU CAN FIND A SIMPLER WORD, USE IT.

Maybe I don't always practice what I learned but Amos

did. He was common, straightforward in his speech about God.

And yet, though Amos built upon his past experience, there is no denying that he did have to begin again after getting kicked out of Jerusalem.

And I can tell you, from what I have experienced and observed, starting over, beginning again, isn't easy.

A big part of pastoral counseling time is spent with people who have to learn to begin again.

You think you have a job in which you are fixed for life. There is a reorganization, downsizing, or something else. Whatever they call it up in the front office, for you it means that you are thrown out, that you have to begin again.

You have a marriage, in which you promise to live together "until death do us part." But at mid-life, to your surprise, you are parted by something other than death. You have to begin again.

To begin again . . . that is the story of our faith.

God began creation again after the flood.

Abraham and Sarah had to begin again in order to do what God wanted.

So to did Jacob, Moses, King David, the prophets, the disciples, St. Paul, the great reformers (Luther, Calvin, Knox,

Wesley), the church itself. Reformed and always reforming we say of the church. In other words we are about the ongoing task of beginning again.

We have, deep within our Christian consciousness, a joy of stories about people who experienced, not just the pain and the disruption of having to begin again, 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 beginning again could be told for some of you here. We Christians have a fancy name for beginning again. We call it "conversion;" or "being born again," or "being born anew," or "being born from above."

For most of us, conversion doesn't mean just starting; more interestingly, for most of us it means starting over, beginning again.

Too often, we have thought of conversion as a time when I get my life together, when things take a turn for the better for me. The story of Amos suggests that this is not saying nearly enough.

Conversion, like what is pictured in Amos, his beginning again, may not be the answer to all your or my problems,

indeed it may be the very beginning of problems we would have never had before God had decided to use you or me.

Beginning again may be painful, challenging, frightening. Yet, this starting over is related to God's disruptive determination to use you and me 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, remember this: 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, is the God who gives us the grace to begin again.