

## ***"When Do We Know if We Ever Measure Up?"***

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman  
at St. Andrew's United Church, Sudbury*

***July 12, 2015***

***Seventh Sunday after Pentecost***

**Readings: Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-26**

The readings today feature two of the “big names” in the biblical record; Amos and John the Baptist. Now we may not be used to thinking of biblical individuals and characters as “big names,” but if we listed the top 50 influential people in the Bible I expect both Amos and John the Baptist would make most individuals’ lists.

Yes, there are individuals like Moses and Deborah, and Adam and Eve, and of course a man named Jesus, but Amos is among the big names, even if he is referred to as a “minor prophet” given the fact what he had to say, though significant, is among the shorter books in the Old Testament.

Now when we think of “big names” today we might focus on Josh Donaldson, third baseman for the Toronto Blue Jays, who received a record 14 million votes to be on the starting line-up for the American League All Star Team. Now that is a big name. But Amos does have much to offer.

In his little book on ***Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel***, T. H. Robinson has a succinct, understated way to talk about the background of Amos.

A shepherd from Tekoa, a modest community and region, Amos “in all his life had never been exposed to the dangers accompanying a fair amount of leisure, a luxurious standard of comfort and the possibility of great wealth.” Amos brought with him “a freedom of spirit and an independence of outlook” that was not tainted by the prevailing wealth and culture of the day.

I find this characterization of Amos somewhat endearing, though I must admit it could be the fantasization of a modern writer trying to capture the essence of someone from centuries ago, a person who has no connection to the realities of today, and so probably Amos would not even understand the difference between what some might call the “leisure class” of today and Amos’ own experience centuries ago..

But as I pondered Robinson’s characterization of Amos, I could not help but think that here was the detailed analysis and description of a trapper in the wilds of northern Ontario. Someone who knows the travelling patterns of animals, who is aware of survival in the bush, who knows how to track and catch animals, and who has skills and abilities that are modest by the world’s standards, but incredibly gifted and skilled in the world sense.

Want a sense of what kind of person Amos was – think of a trapper you may have known in years past, or one characterized in historical treatments of life in the early years of the north. Wonder where Amos got his wisdom? Think of a trapper who can navigate the bush alone without ever feeling at risk or in danger. Wonder how Amos gained his wisdom to be a prophet? Think of someone so aware of the signs and trends of nature that he or she always is aware what will happen next before it happens, like a bird preparing for a storm or a deer aware that the weather is shifting.

Someone wise about the reality of natural phenomenon can’t help but be wise about the significant events of life. It is a similar skill.

For Amos, the day of revelation is a day of Yahweh being the God of righteousness, not necessarily the God of Israel.

What gets the prophets in trouble often, and Amos is no exception to this extent, is that they are more concerned about what is right than they are concerned about defending their own culture and religious traditions, or even saying and doing what is expected of them.

Getting to what is right may be the beginning step, but we also need to know the time and energy needed to transform us into that new reality.

Steven Covey, a business guru of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, known for his popular book ***The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People***, wrote in 1990 a follow-up to that book entitled ***Principle-Centred Leadership***. In this latter book he suggests thinking of personal and business transformation as being like transforming a swamp into an oasis.

A swamp can have stagnant water, all kinds of insect and bugs and maybe even snakes and frogs and moss and algae. An oasis can be fresh water, lovely fragrant flowers, flowing streams, deer and moose gladly coming to the edge of the water for a drink. You may even find the water clean enough to use yourself.

There is no way that one changes a swamp into an oasis in a matter of days, or even weeks. You may need to drain the swamp, even dredge the top layer of soil, and create a deeper pond into which fresh water will be introduced, and the growth of floral life and greenery will transform the land in a few years – not days.

When it comes to finding new ways of living and experiencing life, especially when we are uncertain about the present, or confused about the future, we may feel our lives are like a swamp. In such conditions and experiences we are unable to see the promise of the oasis.

But whether or not we can see it, it is there. The hope for new life is always present, and until we change our ability to be open to new life, we will miss it. We cannot see what we do not understand and anticipate.

Sometimes as parents we are so worried about the development of our children that we fail to see the natural and profound gifts that they have, because we get focussed on deficits or concerns. It may take an outsider or a more distant relative to remind us of the gifts that an offspring has and lives.

Each one of us needs to be open to the promise of new life to begin to hear words of encouragement and insight. Amos spoke in a time when many people were happy and comfortable with their lives – they did not need to hear any new vision about life as God would have us live.

Is it any different today?

We may be blocking new messages because we feel we have heard it all before, and we do not need any new ideas. But when we are ready to receive a message to inspire and guide, to bring hope and encouragement, let us be able to hear the voices that are around us to uplift us along the way.

They may be new voices, rugged voices, even unpolished voices, but they are voices that offer insight when we need it.

And may we have the maturity to hear them and be encouraged by them.