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## **What Do You See?**

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### **Prophet Margins Worship Series**

#### **Introduction**

Do we have prophets today? Are there still people who receive God's voice or the Lord's will, and then can decode and articulate it using their human words to deliver God's message? Is God limited to using people (Prophets) to deliver a divine message only in the context of a faith community or a church?

Listen to this portion of a message delivered to The UN in September 2019. "My message is that we'll be watching you. This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

This was the message delivered by Swedish teen Greta Thunberg. She has become the voice of the worldwide movement to urgently combat climate change. On March 15th of the same year, 2019, an estimated 1.4 million students in 112 countries around the world heeded her call to skip school and demand the environment be protected for their generation.

How many of us are listening to the voices of today's prophets? It is crucial to ask ourselves whose voices we are listening to and how we are participating in the transformation of our world?

## **Context matters**

In our Old Testament reading this morning, we heard the prophet, Amos. He left an anthology of prophetic oracles. According to the New Interpreter's Study Bible, *Amos was a southerner from Tekoa, some ten miles from the capital city, Jerusalem. He was a person from the margins; however, his prophetic activity took place in the northern Kingdom of Israel.*

*His oracles mainly condemned the ruling classes in the north for their oppressive treatment of poor and needy members of society; his oracles also threatened that Israel would be punished by God, probably by military invasion and defeat.*

*In Amos's days, the Northern Kingdom was enjoying a period of relative prosperity because it had succeeded in repelling threats from the Arameans of Damascus.*

*Amos correctly anticipated the invasion of Assyria. He holds out a relatively slim hope that the nation may still save itself by seeking the Lord though he may well have believed that the time for repentance had already come and gone. Such repentance would have needed to take a practical form: the reversal of social oppression.*

This radical message of the need for social justice has made Amos an important prophet for many modern readers of the Bible. In the Amos passage, the plumbline is a prophetic image of God testing Israel and finding it to be askew. A plumbline, of course, was a string with a weight at the end of it used to measure how straight a wall was.

## **Theological reflection**

I firmly believe that God is inviting us to see this Bible passage in light of what is going on in the world and, even more importantly, what is going on in our nation, our city, and our faith community. What or who are the plumb-lines for us and our contemporary world? We need to

measure our lives, practices, words, actions, and behavior with the ultimate expression of God and the incarnated word of God, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For every action, every word we say, and every program or ministry we undertake, we need to be sure we are following Jesus' example of love, grace, and compassion.

What do we see? Is the plumbline or level indicating that we need to make some changes in our lives, actions, or words?

This past week, I learned an important lesson; my words and actions hurt someone. I had no intention of inflicting pain, but I did. I learned that not all people understand our words as we mean them. I asked God for direction, forgiveness, and compassion for me and that person, and God restored the situation. The character and model of Jesus must direct our moral compass. Our nation and institutions, including the church must look to Jesus for every decision, action, and word. As the Bible Says in the epistle of Hebrews 12:2, "Looking unto Jesus, the author, and finisher of *our* faith..."

### **Conclusion**

The plumbline belongs to God, not us, so we must take care and not be judgmental. It is clear the Divine still invites people to declare and manifest God's word.

Let's take a quick look at Amos, this "sheep breeder" from the periphery, a person who didn't belong to the religious or political elite, but a prophet who was confident in who he was and confident in what God had called him to do. Rev. Dr. B. Kevin Smalls from The Disciples UMC Preaching notes says that *the prophetic work always disturbs those in the type of power that is contrary to justice and liberation. God does not support oppressive governments and systems. Those who occupy such power are seldom willing to relinquish it or make the type of adjustments that align with God's will and way.* It is essential to know where we are in God's mission in the

world. Dr. Small presents the following challenging questions; “Are we bold enough to proclaim to a broken, bitter, anger-driven world that God has set a plumbline in our midst?” Can we endure the attacks that come to us when we speak truth to power? Can we answer God’s call to engage in prophetic work, even if that work is done from the margins?

I believe God is raising up people from other fields to declare His will prophetically. Greta Thunberg is a good example. As young as she is, Greta has been brave enough to raise her voice, asking rich countries to make immediate changes to prevent a catastrophic future. As people of faith, we also must be able to see what is out there and what is happening within our community. If we can see the plumbline of God marking how askew we are as a society, it is time to participate in the change and transformation for the good of our world and future generations. May God help us! Amen.