

PROPHETIC WISDOM FOR
AN AGE OF OUTRAGE

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RICHARD
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NEW YORK

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To Sheryl Fullerton, my long-suffering and brilliant editor,
who labored over my many incomplete, incorrect,
and poorly stated ideas to bring this book to print.

To Lee Staman, our worthy librarian and scholar at
the Center for Action and Contemplation, who
assured me that my major thesis here was true.



FOR WHEN PEOPLE ASK

I want a word that means

okay and *not okay*,

more than that: a word that means

devastated and *stunned with joy*.

I want the word that says

I feel it all all at once.

The heart is not like a songbird

singing only one note at a time,

more like a Tuvan throat singer

able to sing both a drone

and simultaneously

two or three harmonics high above it—

a sound, the Tuvans say,

that gives the impression

of wind swirling among rocks.

The heart understands swirl,

how the churning of opposite feelings

weaves through us like an insistent breeze

leads us wordlessly deeper into ourselves,

blesses us with paradox

so we might walk more openly

into this world so rife with devastation,

this world so ripe with joy.

—Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer¹

A hand was there, stretching out to me and holding a scroll. . . . On it was written lamentations, weeping, and moanings. . . . I opened my mouth; he gave me the scroll to eat. . . . I ate it, and it tasted sweet as honey. (Ezekiel 2:9–10; 3:2–3)

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INTRODUCTION

Good Trouble

When we picture a prophet of the Old Testament—and there are many of them, more than thirty, including seven women¹—most of us imagine an angry, wild-haired person ranting and raving at the people of Israel for their many sins or predicting future doom. Some of the prophets did just that, but my years of study, conversation, and contemplation have shown me that this prevailing image is not the truest or most important reality of their work, calling, or messages.

It's true that the prophets called Israel, many times, to return to the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai. After leading the people out of Egyptian slavery, God supplied the law, including the Ten Commandments, that was meant to govern and shape their lives in the Promised Land. They were to refrain from lying, stealing, committing adultery, and so on.

This was Morality 101, the basic order without which a society cannot maintain itself. But the people usually fell short, often disastrously so. They substituted purity codes and performance for the spirit of that law. They forgot not only what they had promised but also how much and how deeply Yahweh cared for them. There was a deep need, then and now, for someone who would call the people to return to God and to justice. Someone who would warn them, critique them, and reveal God's heart to them. We call them prophets, and every religion needs them.

For hundreds of pivotal years—starting around 1300 B.C. and continuing through the eras of Israel's kingdom, exile, and conquest—prophets like Samuel, Jonah, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel performed this utterly important task. Besides being truth-tellers, they were radical change agents, messengers of divine revelation, teachers of a moral alternative, and deconstructors of every prevailing order. Both Isaiah 58 and Ezekiel 3 describe a prophet as a “sentry” or a “watchman,” whose job is to hold Israel maddeningly honest, and to stop the Israelites from relying on arms, money, lies, and power to keep themselves safe and in control.

In this way, they introduced a completely novel role into ancient religion: an officially licensed critic, a devil's advocate who names and exposes their own group's shadow side! Few cultures, if any, develop such a counterintuitive role. By nature, civilization is intent on success and building, and has little time for self-critique. We disparage the other team and work ceaselessly to prove loyalty to our own. Maybe that's why the prophets seem most active from the time after Moses until about five centuries before Jesus, when Israel returned from exile in Babylon. After the exile, except for the moralisms of Malachi and the scattered fragments of Zechariah 9–14, there

seems to be a lack of interest in the prophets, and their voices largely disappear from the scriptural account. Maybe that is why the people of Jesus's time were not ready for him. Their religious and spiritual community was too dispersed to know how to maintain a strong inner spiritual life. External observance had taken over, symbolized by the oft-repeated New Testament opponents of Jesus, the scribes and the Pharisees.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus minces no words in critiquing this scenario:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (Matthew 23:23–24, NRSV)

The same dynamics operate today, with those in power or trying to gain power more interested in protecting their own interests and positions than in seeking justice. If you are a Christian, you might have seen a few paintings or stained-glass windows of a prophet pointing to Jesus, and that might have been their only supposed function! I'm convinced that unless we know the lineage, the exact genre, and the unique approach of the Hebrew prophets, we really can't understand Jesus.

Without prophets, we have settled for violent revolutions and righteous reformations in just about every century. Societies have had no mechanism for reforming from within, and so our histories became about ferreting out heretics, imprisoning and murdering would-be rebels, and protecting shifting, angry, dualistic, and ambitious in-groups, each of which was more invested in their own rightness than the previous group.

Revolutions took the place of evolutions, in which both order and disorder are allowed to work together.² This is not a good way to move forward.

If we look at what prophets do and how they do it, we can see that they follow a classic pattern. When prophets see that the status quo is not working, they encourage what I call “holy disorder,” a scenario in which the fundamental conditions and relationships of the group are disrupted (as when the Israelites were conquered by the Babylonians or persecuted by their enemies). This disruption can take positive form or negative form. Either God outgrows our present, limited understanding and we grow with God (as I wrote in my book *Falling Upward*),³ or we regress due to our inability to love and trust what is happening. Then society reverts to legalism and formality until it ultimately disintegrates. From these disruptions, a new order arises (what I call “reorder”), in which human relations can work at a higher level that is more imaginative, less dualistic, and usually less violent than the first order or the reactive disorder.

The process of allowing and creating holy disorder is surely what Representative John Lewis called getting into “good trouble.” He was referring to the good and necessary trouble of civil disobedience in the pursuit of racial justice, but his philosophy is equally powerful when we think about the prophets. For them, good trouble and holy disorder could draw forth better things—an entirely different consciousness characterized by more justice, more mercy, greater closeness to God. Of course, the process is never linear, and it never stops. The new reorder soon becomes a new order, and we need prophets to keep us from idolizing the new status quo. The only thing more dangerous and more common than narcissism is group narcissism. We have always needed a mecha-

nism for positive change that is organic and comes from within, although we did not usually know that.

This full cycle of reorder is hard to imagine because it seldom happens in history. For example, I find it interesting that we Catholics have the sacrament of “holy orders,” which is given to everyone who becomes a priest, but no ritual for holy disorder, even though prophecy was listed as the second-most-important gift of the Holy Spirit—more important than teaching or even miracles (1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11). We must ask, *Why has critical thinking always had to come from outside our religious systems and hardly been allowed from within?* This is a major problem.

We have tried to reform religion with the same codes of violence and willpower used by corporations, monetary systems, landowners, and nation-states, often leaving the egos and self-interests of hierarchs quite in control. Further, we have a tendency to minimize evil, attacking it in individual “bad guys” instead of exposing and convicting the intergenerational lies that consume most cultures: things like pride, deceit, power, war, and greed.

This, more than any other reason, is why Christianity did little to reform or evolve the Roman, Holy Roman, Russian, French, Spanish, English, or American empires, but instead slept comfortably with every one of them. The evils that ate us alive were seldom called evil because the “priestly” groups were intent on enforcing ritual requirements and purity codes—in which Jesus and the prophets showed little or no interest. Once we lose the prophetic analysis, most evil will be denied, disguised, or hidden among the rules and rituals of *religion and the law itself*. This is how truth is “discerned” in a dualistic world: by winning the purity and identity contests.

The philosopher Ken Wilber famously wrote that our path

to maturity usually involves some form of “cleaning up,” “growing up,” “waking up,” and “showing up,” more or less in that order.⁴ Too often, though, we settle for merely cleaning up our behavior. I can only think of Pope Francis’s recent clarification about the basic meaning of blessings. They are given not to people who have jumped the hoops of supposed moral worthiness, but to people who ask for one! Waking up is often devastatingly simple. It all comes down to *overcoming your separateness and any need to protect it*.

We must be eternally conscious of this fact: *For the untransformed self, religion is the most dangerous temptation of all*. Our egos, when they are validated by religion, are given full permission to enslave, segregate, demean, defraud, and inflate—because all bases are covered with pre-ascribed virtue and a supposed hatred of evil. This is what the prophets expose in their wholesale assault on temple worship, priestly classes, self-serving commandments, and intergenerational wealth. “Be very careful here!” they keep shouting. The prophets know that religion is the best and that religion also risks being the worst. We love to choose sides and declare ourselves sinless and pure and orthodox (“right”), with little evidence that it is true. This is always a surprise to everyone except the prophets.

My favorite thing about the prophetic books of the Bible is that they show a whole series of people in evolution of their understanding of God. Like most of us, the prophets started not only with judgmentalism and anger but also with a superiority complex of placing themselves above others. Then, in various ways, that outlook falls apart over the course of their writings. They move from that anger and judgmentalism to a reordered awareness in which they become more like God: more patient like God, more forgiving like God, more loving like God.

Throughout Scripture, the prophets seem to emphasize one sin above all the rest: idolatry, our habit of making things “God” that are not absolute, infinite, or objectively good. They are ruthless, as well, toward the preoccupations of our private self, which always wants to put itself in the best light. The gospel of Luke points this out directly. After Jesus teaches a highly symbolic “lawyer” that to have eternal life, you are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . and your neighbor as yourself,” the lawyer asks piously, “And who is my neighbor?” The lawyer is asking not because he wants an honest answer, but because he is “anxious to justify himself” (Luke 10:27, 29, JB).

I would go so far as to say that any worship service that does not begin with a sincere and plaintive *kyrie eleison* had best be very careful. The plea for mercy at the beginning of many Christian worship services is a statement and a warning that we are moving onto holy ground. We most likely do not know what we are talking about when we speak of God, so we’d best start with humility. We all and forever need mercy. One wonders what our theologies and worship would look like if we always began with an honest statement of our *not* knowing the real nature of holy mystery.

Prophets, then, are full truth-tellers, not fortune-tellers. They pull back the veil to radically reframe our preferred storyline of history: the boring and predictable narrative of winners and losers, rewards and punishments. They are by definition those rare individuals who see reality in its fullness and dimension, rather than in dualities like totally right or totally wrong, all good or all bad.

There must be someone in every age who can tell the faith community, and society at large, *Your first egoic glance at life—and God—is largely wrong! And it is largely engendered by fear.*

“No one else is your problem,” says the prophet. “You are your own problem. What you think is goodness is too often delusion, and what you think is bad just might be your spiritual best friend.” In doing so, they offer not only criticism but also visions of a more just, more merciful, more peaceful society—and call the people to live into it. Any religion or philosophy that teaches group blindness instead of full seeing is standing in the way of such clarity.

As Isaiah put it, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20, JB). He is describing how all of us use words and feelings to deceive ourselves and others. For example, the American political party that most blatantly hates law and order is invariably the one that loudly repeats the words *law and order* at every convention. Meanwhile, the party that knows it should be for immigrants acts as though it does not really want them in their backyard. Leaders who rail against impurity are too often the ones with a mistress. When we lack self-knowledge, we will unconsciously project our disliked and unknown self onto others, condemning them for the very faults we share. It is no wonder, then, that most of the prophets were murdered, as Jesus notes accusingly in Matthew 23:31.

What a catastrophic arrangement! The French anthropologist and literary critic René Girard wrote that the Bible is unique in all world literature in spotting this universal human avoidance of our own dark side. Girard calls this projecting of our own faults and fears onto others “the scapegoat mechanism.”⁵ It is present in all cultures, but the Bible alone, he writes, sees clearly how scapegoating works. Girard insists that scapegoating is what John was referring to when he described “the [universal] sin of the world” (John 1:29). The undoing of this

tendency would be the task of any would-be savior for humanity and our continually fragile history. Yet it largely remains hidden in plain sight. *The Christian religion has sought to achieve its own innocence rather than act in solidarity with suffering and sinners.* This is a major point, I believe.

Religion worldwide, it seems, remains committed to making something or somebody a sacrifice in every age so that the status quo can be maintained. In our time, it is immigrants at the border; in other times it was Black people in the American South or Indigenous people being driven from their lands. But Jesus, René Girard insists, undoes sacrifice “once and for all” (Hebrews 7:27, 10:10, JB) by his revelation of an infinitely loving God. Such a god is very difficult to instrumentalize or use as a threat. As Paul tells us, in what might be the most subtle and well-argued piece of theology in the New Testament, we are no longer held captive “to the old written code.” After Jesus, we are discharged from the law and free in “the new life of the spirit” (Romans 7:6, NRSV). In short, the prophets and Paul teach that law is never to be an end in itself, but only a boundary for the inflated human ego and a protector of the common good. Paul devotes three whole chapters of Galatians (3–5) and most of Romans to making this point.

The prophet’s job was always spotting where the problem really lies: in the accusing ones themselves and in the delusions of the collective. They point out the universal illusion: “Because your stone throwing is bad, my stone throwing is good.” And if the problem is really located in every group’s aimlessly followed cultural agreements, it cannot be dumped on a few scapegoats, leaving those of us who are “more righteous” innocent and free of guilt or shame.

For spotting the hidden, communal, and disguised nature of sin and evil, the Jewish prophets have no parallels. They are

merciless about truth and the disguises that individuals and groups adopt to protect their egos. Prophets call out not only those in power for their corruption and neglect but also the whole system of temple worship and sacrifice. As Amos puts it, “They lie on ivory beds, and sprawl on their divans, they dine on lambs from the flock, and bawl to the sound of the harp, . . . but about the ruin of the house of Joseph they do not care at all” (Amos 6:4–6, JB).

We have spent the centuries and millennia since constructing the same kinds of self-serving power centers that Jesus and the prophets denounced, and most of us are resigned to this status quo. When news broke of the extent of sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests, for example, very few were surprised to learn how many cardinals and bishops and priests had ignored or tried to cover it up. We are rightly horrified by the violent abuse of the clergy. And yet, we are just not educated in or aware of the ways of structural sin, collective evil, or intergenerational trauma, much less cultural shadows—and we miss the bigger picture. It is not all malicious. We are accustomed to blaming individual bad people—and telling them to go to confession to deal with their personal sins. Any social analysis is still called by some “mixing politics with religion.” But that’s exactly what the prophets do. They call out the collective, not just the individual, as a way of seeking the common good and assuring us that some common good might just be possible. It is a lesson we still find hard to learn.

LEARNING TO LOVE AS GOD LOVES

When the prophet Moses was away on Mount Sinai, the rebellious Israelites, afraid he would not return, insisted on having

a god they could see. His brother, the high priest Aaron, complied. He took all their gold jewelry and cast a golden calf that then became the center of their worship. Unlike Moses, Aaron was following the people's wishes rather than God's.

When Moses returned and saw what had happened, he ground down the golden calf into powder, mixed it with water, and made the Israelites drink what in his eyes was a needed medicine (Exodus 32:20). What a shocking, and profound, act. The prophet invariably makes you “drink” the taste of your poison so that you will avoid it, similar to much addiction work today.

Every priest seems to need a prophet, like Moses, and a sister prophetess, like Miriam, who can constantly expose their golden calves. Priests in the Aaronic tradition were preoccupied with creating rituals and sacrificial worship services—that they alone could lead. They tended to give the people what they wanted, so long as it benefited themselves. Aaron without Moses is always a problem in the making.

As a prophet, Moses acts as an antidote to Aaron's priestly dominance. Aaron creates and maintains the religious container, while Moses makes the container worth preserving and enjoying. Similarly, in the scriptural account of the Exodus, Aaron and Moses's sister, the prophetess Miriam, leads the music, the dancing, and the songs of praise after the Israelites' escape from Egypt (Exodus 15:20–21).^{*} I like to call it performative liberation. Moses, meanwhile, is the full liberation

* I must point out early that the Old Testament sadly includes no record of women prophets who wrote. In those pages, at least, they only act. Maybe that is part of their message. Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Anna are all prophetic protagonists who face difficulty personally rather than write about it. My guess is that today there are more women prophets than men, just because they've been excluded from various systems. I do hope someone explores the path of the prophet from a woman's perspective, because I'm incapable. I still hold my privilege and bias as a white, American, male clergyman.

theologian, forever seeking a balance between cult, code, and community as the Israelites wander through the wilderness. He is the first to fully model this new role that we now call “prophet.” Moses brings the law down the mountain, and he also smashes it when he sees that the people have disobeyed and created the golden calf (Exodus 32:19). In these acts, he integrates order with disorder and thus merits his position as the likely founder of monotheistic religion and of prophecy strictly defined. Moses contains and encloses Aaron’s tendency to heed the crowd rather than God (as he did with the golden calf) and thus makes Aaron effective and not fully idolatrous.

The prophets’ acts of defeating ego and naming scapegoats are, I believe, why they are never going to be popular or much read, despite taking up such a large part of the Bible. Yet their message also demands that we “die before we die,” and learn to see things through the eyes of an infinite love. Without such a love foundation, almost all religions and worldviews devolve into forms of sacrifice, in which we debase something (or someone) else in hopes of achieving worthiness. This is why Jesus talks about “dying to self,” or why Buddhists emphasize “lens wiping” and “ego spotting,” by which adherents remove whatever delusions and bad habits of mind are keeping them from seeing reality clearly. All transformative religions are, each in their own way, trying to defeat the imperial ego and reveal the always camouflaged shadow self. Yet we need to be bathed in the assurance of infinite love before we can risk such ego deflation. The prophets gradually move us toward and through such divine assurance.

You see, as the prophets knew so well, we like our illusions, we like having enemies, and we are quite accustomed to our wars and prejudices, as much as we insist the contrary. They make us feel morally superior, even heroic, like the archangel

Michael slaying the dragon and driving all evil out of heaven (Revelation 12:7–8, 20:2–3), thus dividing the whole of creation into absolute good and absolute evil, and leaving us, of course, on the side of absolute good. We see this up to our own time in the universal attraction to and the valorization of war, even when we are clearly acting in our own interests and what we are doing is not objectively good. Why does the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” suddenly not apply? Only Quakers, Amish, Mennonites, and recent teachers of nonviolence have had the courage to even ask this troubling question.

God is still in the very slow process of disenchanting us out of our love of winning and succeeding. The slow metamorphosis of our notions of God—from lion to lamb, from anger to tears, from lonely solitude to grateful community—is quietly taking place. Humanity *is* indeed growing up. The evidence is just hard to see unless we are exposed, at least once, to this prophetic kind of countercultural truth. Today, for example, I am in awe at the number of people who are sincerely and often totally value oriented without belonging to any organized group that would make them follow its rules. This is new, I think, at least on such a broad scale. You can have values without group belonging, although you will probably be less strategically effective without a team.

Basically, this is the number one lesson: We can learn to love others by closely observing how God loves us and all of creation. Often this will mean observing and imitating nature’s universal song of praise, just as Saint Francis, Hildegard of Bingen, William Wordsworth, John Muir, and Mary Oliver all did. Just gazing for an extended period at a spring bulb pushing up from dark soil or a robin hopping across the lawn—or at anything in nature—will reveal God’s utter gratuity and the sacredness of every created thing. That is how God sees. Most

of us never learned the lessons to be found in this kind of contemplation of the mysterious movement of living and dying, because we started by reading human texts that portrayed God as angry, wrathful, judgmental, and punitive. We pretty much anthropomorphized all our gods, imagining they were as small and righteous as we are!

The prophets started out the same way, but they changed and grew up. That is a theme of themes in this small book. The Hebrew prophets would not allow Israel to be unfaithful to God's ever-faithful love, because they were confident in their covenant relationship (*hesed*) that had loved them into community and courage. It was God's consistent action toward them, not their own worthiness or status as the "chosen people," that made them "chosen"!

It reminds me of my little-boy self, who fully believed that I was the "chosen one," my mother's favorite out of the four of us kids. It was not objectively true, but the belief worked its magic on me. It was easy to believe I was God's chosen, just as I was "Dickie Boy" to both Mom and Dad. Chosenness draws us into both oneness and goodness, almost like a magnet. In the same way, the prophets brilliantly insist that the Israelites must focus on God as their source of identity and group solidarity. God made them both one and good at the same time—by contagion and by reflection.

In a Trinitarian worldview, *all reality is relationship at its core*.⁶ This one single benevolent mirror presented itself to the Israelites and made them utterly safe, free, and true—and available for daily election and interaction, which we would rightly call prayer, especially group prayer and song. Yahweh was available to them as the God of Israel, and the prophets had to access this availability themselves by a mutual vulnerability, risk, and self-disclosure. Just as we do today.

Astoundingly, the prophets repeatedly described this relationship as a “marriage” with God. As Hosea puts it, “I will betroth you to myself for ever, betroth you with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love; I will betroth you to myself with faithfulness, and thus you will come to know Yahweh” (Hosea 2:19–20, JB). This intimacy is radical, totally unlike anything humanity had ever imagined of God! Or of itself. Even the word *know* is striking in the original Hebrew; it is the word usually used for intimate (or carnal) knowing. It seems we are wasting our time seeking rational dogmatic knowledge of Yahweh when this inner, intimate, secret knowing is what we have already been given—and what alone convicts us.

Yet the ancient Israelites, just like us, found the “salvation” of this marriage relationship impossible to live out and quite dangerous to trust. “I will save them by the Lord their God; I will not save them by bow or sword or battle, horse or horseman,” Hosea outrageously promises (Hosea 1:7, KJV). In other words, their salvation will not be found in private purity, or in willpower, but in trustful union between Yahweh and Israel’s collective. “I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them with all my heart,” says Yahweh (Hosea 14:4, JB). To receive God’s forgiveness and tender love is, in fact, to receive God’s infinity in little doses, which might just be called days or hours. You cannot prove them or account for having experienced them; they just add up as you get older, if you are receptive. And even one dose, one tenth, or one hundredth of infinity is still infinity! Jesus called it a mere mustard seed—all that is needed, it seems (Mark 4:30–32).

Is this vision of the human-divine relationship as naïve as it sounds? Is it foolhardy to trust in a radical, ongoing arrangement of being chosen by Yahweh? I hope to demonstrate in this book that the prophets’ answer is a complex no. In the

prophets, religion—and indeed, humankind—appears to be slowly morphing from code, creed, and cult to a kind of *mutual presencing*, a gradually learned “nakedness and vulnerability” that requires deliberate and focused attention, receptivity, and persistent awareness on both sides. Like soft, quiet snow, our experience of God’s love accumulates to a fullness. Like an expanding and deepening delta, it broadens into many undeniable rivulets. You know it. You see it. You don’t “believe” in it.

The whole Bible can be seen as a chronicle of examples meant to assure us that we are not crazy if we accept this invitation to vulnerability before God and one another. Such an initial attitude of vulnerability, as my friend Brené Brown teaches so well, is where all relationships begin to blossom.⁷

I am calling this surprising letting down of defenses—from both sides—the prophetic “way of tears,” as opposed to our more common ways of heroic willpower, commandment, obedience, force, anger, and legitimated violence. It takes an initial tender vulnerability (“wounding”) to defeat our ego and to open us to full consciousness—which must include the scary unconscious! It is a movement, frankly, from the Ten Commandments to the eight beatitudes. A movement that the prophets illustrated for us twenty-five hundred years ago, and that we need—out of desire and desperation—to recover today.

My hope is that this small book might accelerate the pace of human and spiritual vulnerability by encouraging each of us to take a first daring step. My first task is surely to ask that you forgive me for struggling to formulate words and concepts of such majesty and impact. It is wise, and no surprise, that the Hebrews insisted on never pronouncing the name of Yahweh. This cosmic act of humility was fully intended to keep both

religion and theology always searching. The linguist and historian Heinrich Zimmer said that “the best things cannot be talked about.”⁸ And yet, like composers in every language, we still try to write our endless love songs. We must attempt the same here.*

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* For the sake of simplifying sentence structure, I will often resort to gender-specific pronouns for God. Along with forgiving the whole universe for being imperfect, most of us also have to forgive the severe limitations of the English language or any language. Surely this is why the Spirit gave believers the incoherent “gift of tongues”—to keep us from climbing another Tower of Babel of supposedly perfect words. We all know God is beyond gender.

THE
TEARS
OF
THINGS

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CHAPTER 1

The Tears of Things

In the first book of Virgil's *Aeneid* (line 462), the hero Aeneas gazes at a mural that depicts a battle of the Trojan War and the deaths of his friends and countrymen. He is so moved with sorrow at the tragedy of it all that he speaks of “the tears of things” (*lacrimae rerum*). As Seamus Heaney translates it, “There are tears at the heart of things”—at the heart of our human experience.¹ Only tears can move both Aeneas and us beyond our deserved and paralyzing anger at evil, death, and injustice without losing the deep legitimacy of that anger.

This phrase “the tears of things” has continued to be quoted and requoted in many contexts over the centuries. You can find it on war memorials, in the work of poets, in the music of Franz Liszt, and in Pope Francis's recent encyclical letter

“Fratelli Tutti.” (I myself remember it because of a haggard, bent-over Latin teacher who would often enter the classroom moaning “*Lacrimae rerum*” several times before he began quizzing us. It might have been comic if it weren’t so tragic!)

Because the phrase has no prepositions in Latin, it allows two meanings at the same time: Virgil seems to be saying that there are both “tears *in* things” and “tears *for* things.” And each of these tears leads to the other. Though translators often feel compelled to choose one or the other meaning, I believe the poet implies it is both.

There is an inherent sadness and tragedy in almost all situations: in our relationships, our mistakes, our failures large and small, and even our victories. We must develop a very real empathy for this reality, knowing that we cannot fully fix things, entirely change them, or make them to our liking. This “way of tears,” and the deep vulnerability that it expresses, is opposed to our normal ways of seeking control through willpower, commandment, force, retribution, and violence. Instead, we begin in a state of empathy *with* and *for* things and people and events, which just might be the opposite of judgmentalism. It is hard to be on the attack when you are weeping.

Prophets and mystics recognize what most of us do not—that *all things have tears and all things deserve tears*. They know that grief and sadness are doorways to understanding life in a non-egocentric way. Tears come from both awe and empathy, and they generate even deeper awe and deeper empathy in us. The sympathy that wells up when we weep can be life-changing, too, drawing us out of ourselves and into communion with those around us. This is continuously exemplified in the writings that we have received from the Hebrew prophets.

After a lifetime of counseling and retreat work—not to mention my own spiritual direction—I have become con-

vinced that most anger comes, first of all, from a place of *deep sadness*. Years ago, when I led male initiation rites at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, I would watch men's jaws drop open and their faces turn pale when I said this. Life disappoints and hurts all of us, and the majority of people, particularly men, do not know how to react—except as a child does, with anger and rage. It is a defensive, reactionary, and totally understandable posture, but it often goes nowhere, and only creates cycles of bitterness and retaliation.

Over time, the Hebrew prophets came to see this profound connection between sadness and anger. It was what converted them to a level of truth-telling that is deeply and forever true—which is the real sign of a prophet. They first needed to get angry at injustices, oppression, and war. Anger can be deserved and even virtuous, particularly when it motivates us to begin seeking a necessary change. But only until sunset, Paul says (Ephesians 4:26). If we stay with our rage and resentment too long, we will righteously and unthinkingly pass on the hurt in ever new directions, and we injure our own souls in ways we don't even recognize. This is killing our postmodern world.

In this way, the realization that all things have tears, and most things deserve tears, might even be defined as a form of salvation: *from ourselves and from our illusions*. The prophets knew and taught and modeled that anger must first be recognized, allowed—even loved!—as an expression of the deep, normally inaccessible sadness that all of us carry. Even Jesus, our enlightened one, “sobbed” over the whole city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and at the death of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35). In his final “sadness . . . and great distress” in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37, JB), “his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood” (Luke 22:44, JB).

Anybody who's on the edge, disadvantaged in some way, or barred from a position of hegemony or power will naturally understand the tears of the prophets, with their gut-level knowledge of systemic evil, cultural sin, and group illusion. Black Americans might have seen white people act nice or speak of human equality, for example, but they knew we lived behind a collective lie. Collective greed is killing America today. We make everything about money—everything—and injustices like these will naturally leave us exasperated and ultimately sad. How can we look at the suffering taking place in Gaza, or the violence of Hamas, or the people dying in Ukraine and be anything but sad? It's sad beyond words or concepts. Only the body can know it.

I recently turned eighty. The older I get, the more it feels like I must forgive almost everything for not being perfect, or as I first wanted or needed it to be. This is true of Christianity, the United States, politics in general, and most of all myself. Remember, if you do not transform your pain and egoic anger, you will always transmit it in another form. This transformation is the supreme work of all true spirituality and spiritual communities. Those communities offer us a place where our sadness and rage can be refined into human sympathy and active compassion.

Forgiveness of reality—including tragic reality—is the heart of the matter. All things cry for forgiveness in their imperfection, their incompleteness, their woundedness, their constant movement toward death. Mere rage or resentment will not change any of these realities. Tears often will, though: first by changing the one who weeps, and then by moving any who draw near to the weeping. Somehow, the prophets knew, the soul must weep to be a soul at all.

READING THE PROPHETIC JOURNEY

I fully admit that the prophets are very hard to read. Their writings invariably start with long stretches of strident anger and judgment, leading many of us to close the book or focus on a few favorable one-liners. These authors sound too much like the clergy and the early authority figures who berated us or moved us away from deserved sadness with their moralistic, unhelpful warnings, like “Don’t be sad” and “Everything happens for a reason.” Yet there is more going on beneath the surface, even in the portions of these books that strike us as harsh or off-putting.

During the writing of this book, I had an enlightening visit from the author and teacher Meg Wheatley. Meg has done much excellent work in systems thinking, leadership, and organization, and in her later years she has rather calmly come to accept her vocation as a prophet.

She believes, together with the Choctaw elder and Episcopal bishop Steven Charleston, that prophets “appear first as an early warning system within any culture at risk.”² They are trying to warn us against the suffering that *our own collective behavior is bringing upon us*. Unfortunately, most people today (and many of the biblical texts as well) attribute this suffering to direct retribution from God. This misdirects the healing message.

This has kept us at the magical level of thinking, instead of moving us toward the critical level of thinking that truly transforms culture and individuals. We cannot know God, cannot know love or trust, when our brains are hijacked by the three *F*’s of *fight*, *flight*, and *freeze*. Many people appear to be living their whole lives in one or more of those states today. We now

call it trauma or PTSD, and see it everywhere and recognize that it passes intergenerationally. I suspect that this is what the church was recognizing with its poorly named idea of “original sin.”

To address this issue correctly is of urgent importance for biblical studies, for religion in general, and for all of us personally and spiritually. A transactional, magical understanding of original sin has often led people to belligerent anger, self-serving zeal, rash judgments about those who were not “correctly” baptized, and undeserved pontification about those who were. Without some kind of human and psyche-based understanding of sin, I only see this problem continuing in ever-new formulations for the rest of human history.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did not intend his statement “Blessed are those who weep” (Luke 6:1) to be sentimentalized or remain unnoticed. Hard-heartedness, or what Zechariah and other prophets called “hearts of flint,” prevented the people from hearing the law and the words that Yahweh had sent by the Spirit. A heart of stone cannot recognize the empires it builds and the empires it worships. Lamentation does. It moves us through anger and sadness, empowering us to truly hear and respond to the always-tragic now.

The prophet Ezekiel says it like this: “I shall give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your bodies and give you a heart of flesh instead. I shall put my spirit in you. . . . You shall be my people and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:26–28, JB). This is the apotheosis of all healthy religion, the organ transplant that we all long for, the interior religiosity that all spirituality seeks.

Of course, language about God having emotions is always a projection of our human emotions onto God. But if we can

understand that God weeps over the human situation—as Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem, again over Lazarus’s death, and in Gethsemane—we know it’s a universal truth. Instead of being hateful, God is sad and pitying. The English Dominican theologian Gerald Vann wrote a book called *The Divine Pity* and made much the same point. God doesn’t hate anything God created, but God pities it in the true meaning of the word *pity*, which is to have compassion for the suffering of everything.

By following the prophets’ *full journey* from anger to sadness and beyond, we can mature in belief, as they had to do themselves. All the prophets started with anger, or even rage, at all the right things: injustice, oppression, deceit, misuse of money, power, even religion itself. But with only a couple of exceptions (Nahum and Obadiah, who remained angry), they did not stop there. They were not just reformers; they were also mystics who were captivated by the wholeness and beauty at the heart of reality at the same time as they were confronting injustice. I hope to make those distinctions clear in this book. We miss the point when we confuse prophets with mere liberal humanists.

Truth and prophecy must be subjected to the refiner’s fire of discernment. As we are slowly discovering with wildfires, a healthy forest needs to have its overgrowth and undergrowth cleared out, to prevent a more destructive future blaze. This is the more common way the metaphor of fire is used in the Bible—not as an element of torture, but as a purifying force. For example, see Malachi 3:2–3 (NRSV): “For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness.” (The same kind of language is

used in Isaiah 1:25, 43:2, and 48:10; Zechariah 13:8–9; Psalm 66:10; Luke 12:49; and 1 Peter 1:7 and 4:12–13.)

If you read the prophets, you will be led through many of the same stages that any of us go through as we grow up spiritually. In much of their writing, we see early-stage moral responses, full of threat and retribution, as in this passage from Zephaniah:

How bitter the sound of the day of Yahweh,
 the day when the warrior shouts his cry of war.
 A day of wrath [*dies irae*] that day,
 a day of distress and agony,
 a day of ruin and devastation. . . .
 I am going to bring such distress on them
 that they will grope like the blind. . . .
 On the day of the fire of his jealousy,
 all the earth will be consumed.
 (Zephaniah 1:14–18, JB)

This angry, judging spirit animated the Catholic funeral mass through the Middle Ages and beyond, into the many funerals I witnessed as a young altar boy. The organist pumped out the dour and haunting melody with threat and abandon. She knew it by heart, as I am sure we all did. To this day, many evangelicals seem to love the word *wrath* in much of their music. (One wonders how much the reformers reformed us!) For some reason, we seem to be attracted to threat, no matter what creed we profess or which group we belong to.

But if you stick with the prophets, you can watch them progress through various stages of bargaining, conviction, epiphany, deeper God experience—followed by extended passages of further threat, seductive promises, warnings, and fear—

until they lead you toward and through their own needed deconstruction and into their eventual reconstruction. The old *dies irae* refrain of Zephaniah has, by his last chapter, morphed into something else: “Yahweh your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult with joy over you, he will renew you by his love, he will dance with shouts of joy as at a festival” (Zephaniah 3:17, JB). How can this be the same man?

Perhaps prophets (both the true ones and those often referred to as false ones) are mentioned in the Bible to teach us how *not* to do prophecy. False prophets, or poorly stated prophecy, can teach us that half right often passes for right but is often truth’s most dangerous counterpart. Truth without love is not transformational truth. Truth from a cruel heart undoes its message. Already in Deuteronomy, a false prophet is described as one who confuses his own truth with God’s truth. He is rightly called a “diviner of dreams” (Deuteronomy 13:2). This problem will surely never cease being a problem, but the text immediately gives us a clue for discernment: “Your God is testing you to see whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul” (Deuteronomy 13:3, NRSV). The answer is almost too simple.

It seems to be a journey of refining the real message, fire by fire, until we reach a final state of joy and hopefulness. This is the clear trajectory of human life. All of us, prophets included, usually must do it wrong, or partly wrong, many times before we can do it right. It cannot be any different, as a good parent knows.

A good example is the book of Habakkuk, written around 600 B.C. You must endure three full chapters of the prophet’s railing and raging until you get to the final three verses, where you can join him in exulting and dancing: “with hind’s feet on the high places” (Habakkuk 3:19, KJV). It seems that once

Habakkuk had cataloged the people's wrongdoing and fully appreciated Yahweh's might in coming forth "to save your own anointed" (3:13), he pivoted to praise.

Some scholars call the final three verses Habakkuk's "Great Nevertheless": "Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord" (Habakkuk 3:17–18, NRSV).

Frankly, I think you could describe every one of the prophets eventually yelling "Nevertheless!" after all their raging and convicting.

You cannot read the prophets as if each verse offers a moral example that each of us should follow. Many verses tell you, in effect, what *not* to do. If you quote or follow the prophets in their immature stages, you might end up eating your children (Jeremiah 19:9), firebombing the temple, and meeting a God who is mainly known for his wrath, vanity, divisiveness, pettiness, and petulance (Ezekiel 13). More likely, these verses depict our untransformed self *speaking as if it were God* (which is exactly how the untransformed self likes to speak). You must stay with the text and follow the prophets' progress toward the full word of God.

Only *the whole narrative* of any book of the Bible really deserves to be called inspired. The prophets do eventually arrive at the full picture, but if we do not teach and use such a spiritual or historical-critical approach to our reading of the Bible, we should not be surprised when more and more thinking people give up on Christianity and our willful ignorance about how literature works—which too often is what we substitute for faith. As Catholics used to say, "Grace builds on nature." It does not defeat or overcome nature. That is akin to

the philosopher Ken Wilber's helpful direction to learn to "transcend and include."³

The prophetic texts end up being lessons on both the purification of message and the purification of method, too. Just like us, none of the prophets seem to begin converted. Isaiah was too anti-temple, Jeremiah projected his own emotions onto God, and Amos might have just enjoyed being a contrarian. *We can only learn great things gradually, it seems!*

Saint Paul says it better: "For we know imperfectly, and *we prophesy imperfectly*, and only when perfection comes will the imperfect come to an end" (1 Corinthians 13:9–10, emphasis mine). This is true for all people, in every age. Paul is saying that teachers and prophets change and grow up, learning by their own mistakes, as Paul famously did himself. This should be the big message that we call *conversion* or *repentance*—and we should remember that it is seldom, quite seldom, a one-time affair.

If we're trying to understand how God moves in the world, searching questions will do us so much more good than firm answers. Jesus and Paul almost force us to ask questions by not covering all their bases as a modern scholar would do. This frankly creates major problems for the cynical postmodern student who is trained to expect answers—and answers with fitting arguments. Almost no biblical writers suffer from such a bias, so let's go a little further.

A METHOD FOR READING THE PROPHETS

This is what I recommend. Read each prophetic book through once. Then reread it and mark it up, looking for the pattern I've described. You might do it like this:

- Historical narrative (most of text): Leave unmarked.
- Response of threat, rage, and retribution: Highlight in red.
- Passages of inner conflict and early awareness: Highlight in yellow.
- “Suffered-through-to” response (the word of God): Highlight in green.

We have created generations of good people who use the red and yellow verses as if they were inspired, mature statements. But if you read them closely, you will begin to see a pattern I have long taught about the way we progress as human beings: from *order* into what seems to be *disorder*, and finally reaching some kind of *reorder*. Jeremiah, for example, starts as a “true believer” with his dramatic account of being called by God (order), but when his work as a prophet makes him unpopular among his people, he goes through major resentment toward God (disorder). Only in the later chapters, after the Israelites return from exile, does he break into freedom and joyous conviction (reorder).

Without this self-correcting path, we all become Narcissus, falling in love with our own image in the water. Those who love order need to be humbled by the experience of holy disorder. Those working through disorder need the insight of reorder, plus a major respect for some basic order (the true meaning of a conservative), and any new reorder (which progressives love) will soon need a further disordering. It is the natural flow of grace, for both our individual lives and the lives

of our institutions. The prophets tell us that we can and even must trust this cycle of living and dying.

Without this growth process, most of us believe our first presented order is all there is. This is why we have so much immature religion. What we learn early in life, with the mind of a four- to six-year-old, is just to get us started. We first need the ark and the horrible flood to be literal, but when we act as if this is the main point of such stories, it puts us in an untenable and even absurd position. Where did Cain and Abel's wives come from, for example? Did the whole earth really speak the same language before the Tower of Babel? Are "all Cretans liars" (Titus 1:12)? "Now that I have become a man," Paul says, "all childish ways must be put behind me" (1 Corinthians 13:11). Such passages are a shout-out and a demand for an adult Christianity, rather than the version that sentimentalizes faith at the childish level.

We must know that our formulas and group consensus will never change the world—or ourselves—in the ways that the prophets and Jesus demand. Unless we learn how to study the prophets as a rite of passage into adult religion, I do not think their writings and insights will be of much use.

Jesus gave us a rather clear code for authenticity: "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:15–20). So let's always look for the fruits of the Spirit in our entire use of the Bible: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23, JB). Without such fruits showing themselves, it is me talking, not God. When these fruits are evident, we are talking as one.

"Blessed are those who weep," Jesus says in Matthew's gospel (5:4). Yet we can never mandate tears; we can only allow them, encourage them, and join with them as they soften our

soul. Tears encourage us to move forward not by shame or guilt (although there is such a thing as good guilt and needed shame), but by sadness and empathy. The tragedy is in this world, not the next. I believe this is the worldview of the Jewish prophets. What sounds like cynicism and despair about our tragic human reality ends up being utter optimism and satisfaction about history in general and the soul in particular.

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CHAPTER 2

Amos: Messenger to the Collective

“I was no prophet and did not belong to any brotherhood of prophets,” Amos told Amaziah the priest. “I am a mere shepherd and a dresser of fig trees. Yahweh took me and said, ‘Go, prophesy to the people of Israel.’” (Amos 7:12–15)

The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century B.C. in a small town in Judah called Tekoa. There he scratched out a living as a herdsman and a pruner of trees. His prophecies emerged from neither a formal education nor a family position nor any priestly role or inheritance, but from his foundational perspective as a peasant. Those at the top tend to believe things are the way they are for good reason, but the poor know in their bones that things are not as they should be.

Amos does not initially even claim the title of prophet, as you see above in the chapter-opening quote. You would think his contemporaries would have written him off as an unedu-

cated naysayer, but he was nevertheless a very important voice in Israel, even as he largely criticized the Israelites and others. Most scholars believe he set the tone and manner of a writing prophet and was accepted as such by historic Israel. He showed other prophets how to do it and gave them permission to publicly criticize their own society.

God called Amos during the reign of Jeroboam II (786–746 B.C.), at the height of Israel’s greatest territorial expansion and prosperity. Many Israelites interpreted their success as a sign of God’s special favor. But Amos saw their society for what it was. He preached against the people’s transgressions, their complacency, their reliance on military might, their injustices in social dealing, their immorality, and their shallow piety. He was particularly harsh in criticizing those who squeezed lives of luxury out of an unjust system: “Listen to this word, you cows of Bashan, living in the mountain of Samaria, oppressing the needy, crushing the poor, saying to your husbands, ‘Bring us something to drink’” (Amos 4:1). All of this, of course, put him in conflict with the religious authorities. They expelled Amos from the royal sanctuary and commanded him not to prophesy there again. But he did not obey. He returned to Judah and wrote down the essence of his public preaching, which we have in the book of Amos.

This prophetic culture-smashing, or “bias toward the bottom,” as I call it, was largely unrecognized in the West for most of the next three thousand years. Our bias, in our society and in our churches, has invariably been from the top and toward the top. We liked kings and bishops much more than we even noticed layfolk, women, and herdsmen. The common people were not seen as important or influential, despite all that Jesus taught us about “the little ones.” That this has been the case shows the unfortunate lack of influence of the He-

brew prophetic mind on religion in general—and Christianity in particular.

The management guru Peter Drucker was famous for saying, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” In a similar way, I believe that culture eats religion for lunch. By that, I mean our beliefs are determined much more by our dominant ways of life and our surrounding cultural influences than by what we say we believe religiously. In every country where I have taught, it was culture that was running the show far more than religion. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is far more Roman and parochial than catholic. It is universal in its geographical spread but usually quite provincial and ethnic in its concrete manifestations. We can see this in the unique art and moralities of each Catholic area. Until very recently, artists in Anglo countries were embarrassed at nudity, while Germans and Italians reveled in it. Law is actually expected to be obeyed in English-speaking Catholicism—especially Church law. For Italians, it is just a vague suggestion. (However, it’s worth noting that the hookup culture of American youth proceeds at Catholic universities just as much as it does at the Ivy League universities, as far as I can tell.)

Every viewpoint is a view from a point, and we had best know our own. Where you start largely determines the questions you ask (or don’t ask), the trajectory you set, and the goals you hope to achieve. Truth does not appear like an apparition of low-hanging fruit in a celestial garden. It always comes wrapped in the society and historical moment that produced it.

This is as true of the prophets’ writings as it is for us. Each one of them is situated in a historical moment that is crucial for understanding them. Theoretical truths about the authority of the priesthood or the unfairness of taxes must always

be seen in the context of their moment, their society, and their audience. Otherwise, we will interpret their texts in a vacuum, or through our own limited lens, which can lead to misunderstanding—or worse. This was how we arrived, sometimes for a span of centuries, at self-interested interpretations that allowed us to justify prejudice, slavery, exorbitant wealth, and whatever else we preferred. Or, more commonly, we read the whole thing in terms of our private journey toward salvation. When we lose the bias toward the bottom, it's often because we never got on the biblical trajectory to begin with. We were far more Egyptians and Babylonians, Romans and Greeks, than enslaved Hebrews seeking liberation.

Theoretical truths that touch no one deeply are hardly truth at all. Yes, truth is universal and absolute, but it must *show itself in a specific context*. Amos, for example, sequentially names the violence and aggression in “the three crimes, the four crimes” of the cities of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab (1:3–2:3). While the text doesn't specify what those “crimes” were, we can assume that Amos's original readers would have been intimately familiar with them. Note that these are the surrounding neighbors of Israel and Judah, so we are not talking about the Jewish covenant here, but more likely universal human values and rights like loyalty and compassion. A true prophet names evil wherever it is festering.

Amos, like other prophets, does not stay forever in his initial anger and threat of punishment. Instead, he transforms his anger into generative, creative energy. After his judgments, warnings, and threats, which take up most of chapters 1–4, we see him moving toward a plaintive sadness in chapter 4:6–11, repeating five times that the people have failed to respond to Yahweh's outreach: “Yet you never came back to me.” Here again is the “divine pity” showing itself. He sounds disap-

pointed more than angry at this point, and, surely enough, he breaks into praise several times: “For it was he who formed the mountains and created the wind, reveals his mind to man, and makes both dawn and dark, and walks on the top of the heights of the world—Lord, the God of Hosts, is his name” (Amos 4:13). Amos grows into a mystic poet right before us, balancing out the initial anger of the pruner of trees with the reverence of a fully realized prophet.

EVIL IN THE COLLECTIVE

A second lesson that we draw from Amos, besides his bias toward the bottom, is that he issues his prophecy to the collective rather than to individuals. Even when he singles out the temple priest Amaziah and the king Jeroboam for criticism, they are stand-ins for the two elite groups (priests and rulers) that Amos implicates as part of the corrupt power system. The prophet’s judgments are clearly directed at the group, the culture, the collective, the society. Amos knew that most collectives are content to locate evil among individuals. But there is little value in placing our attention merely on a handful of bad actors. Culture and systems are what create the large-scale evils that threaten us—such as poverty, war, and ecological devastation. Religion must address collective evil. Nothing will ever change if we merely convert, imprison, or judge “bad guys.”

That is why, though Jesus healed individuals, he simultaneously critiqued the systems that made them need healing. In fact, the best way to interpret most of his healing stories is to look at the whys. Why was a man chained in the cemetery (Luke 8:26–39)? Why were the women Jesus loved so often adulterers and prostitutes (John 8:1–11)? Why has a

woman with chronic bleeding given all her money to doctors (Mark 5:26)? If you read these stories as if Jesus is only performing miraculous medical cures, you might think “Wow!” for five seconds. But when you ask why the healing was needed, you have a whole new way of seeing what needs to change, which is invariably the bigger power structure: the institutionalized evils that no longer look evil; the “structural sins,” as Pope Francis calls them; or even the collective unconscious, which is often better exposed by art, music, cinema, and theater than it is by preachers.

Amos judges, critiques, and makes promises and threats to many, many collectives. It is a long list: the settlements of Carmel and Damascus, the house of Hazeael, Aram, Gaza, Philistia, Tyre, Phoenicia, Edom, Teman, Bozrah, Ammon, Moab, Kerioth, Judah, the Amorites, Egypt, Assyria, Samaria, Gilgal, the house of Israel (many times throughout), Kaiwan, Calneh, Hamath, Gath, the house of Joseph, Karnaim, Arabah, Beersheba, the temple shrine at Bethel, the “tottering hut of David” (9:11, a sarcastic insult), “the remnant of Edom and all the nations that belonged to me” (9:12, JB), and many more. Note that he does not limit divine judgment to the people of Judah and Israel, but directs his prophecies to neighboring nations, who are also under Yahweh’s dominion. We need to follow the same pattern today, as leaders around the world did in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948.

This concentration on the collectives changes our moral focus entirely. If we do not recognize that evil first and foundationally resides in the group, we will continue to search out, condemn, or perhaps forgive the “few bad apples,” thinking that will take care of our problems. But too often, sins we condemn in the individual are admired, or at least given a cultural

pass, at the corporate level. Consider some of the contradictions in our own culture, for example:

Killing is wrong, but war is good.

Greed is wrong, but luxury and capitalism are ideals to be sought after.

Pride is bad, but nationalism and patriotism are admirable (never in the Bible, however).

Lust is wrong, but flirting and seduction are attractive.

Envy is a capital sin, but advertising is our way of life.

Anger at our neighbor is wrong, but angry people get their way.

Sloth is a sin, but wealthy people can take it easy.

Murder is wrong, but easy access to guns is a right and duty.

You can see how we got the sense, shared by many, that we are living under an utterly conflicted morality. Even “capital sins” such as greed and ambition are no longer even critiqued at the individual level, but seen as virtues.

The view from the bottom helps us escape this human tendency. I have learned from a lifetime as a preacher that even a slight critique of capitalism is totally unacceptable in American pulpits. It can be intuitively and freely understood, however, in the barrios of Guatemala, or the lower-middle-class Mexican American parish where I preached regularly until Covid, because their viewpoint is from the receiving end of capitalism’s damages. Those who benefit from capitalism, or other domi-

nant systems of power, will often assign virtue to rare, distant individuals called saints—and even then only after they die. We must learn to see virtue as involving some form of giving back to the community and society, not just privatized “purity.”

The church has been trying for centuries to save individuals while ignoring the corrupt system in which those individuals operate. God, by definition, deals with the whole, but our egos keep us lost in the small parts that we think we can control. This is why all those millions of individuals who walked the aisle to repent at the Billy Graham crusades did not add up to a nonviolent Mississippi, or a decrease in lynching in Alabama, or a reduction in poverty in California.

My point here is that the prophets approached evil from an entirely different perspective. (See “A Good Summary,” page 161.) Amos called out what he termed the oppressive “cows of Bashan” (4:1) instead of just criticizing one anecdotal woman living in the lap of luxury while the poor starved. The prophets, far ahead of their time, learned that it is social sin that destroys civilization and humanity: global warming, war, idealization of immense wealth, celebrity worship, the pursuit of fame and fortune, immense and growing income inequality, a denial of common truth, and on and on. They attacked hidden cultural assumptions more than they did the people caught up in them.

Religion and God, almost by definition, are meant to keep us living in the utterly big picture, the generative and generous state of mind that Jesus called the reign of God. Yet the only real sins we seem to agree on are the sexual ones—and even those, not so much. Jesus, you can see when you read the Gospels, is not much concerned about sexual issues, for example, except as matters of justice and honesty. Even the concept of “social justice” has been misunderstood and malformed by

many Americans today. In comfortable countries, the large middle class now shares the perspectives that were historically only those of the privileged and the elite. We have been co-opted with just enough comfort *not* to feel the pinch that most of the developing world feels every day.

The Hebrew prophets found their truth not in books and laws, but in questions of love at its most unsentimental and mature level. Amos's emphasis is clearly *against* temple priests, kings, and luxury, and *for* the common people and justice. I wonder if that's why we Christians know almost nothing about Amos. His message is culturally incompatible with our modern individualistic values, and with our perennial tendency to keep our commitments and responsibilities socially harmless. Do the following pronouncements sound anything like what you hear in your Catholic, evangelical, or mainline church, for example?

You, Israel, have sold virtuous men for silver,
Poor men for a pair of sandals,
You trample on the heads of the ordinary people,
And push the poor out of your path. (Amos 2:6–7)

See what disorder there is in Samaria,
See what oppression is found inside the palaces
of Egypt.
They know nothing of fair dealing,
they cram their palaces full by harshness and
extortion. (Amos 3:9–10)

I hate, I despise your feasts,
I take no pleasure in your festivals. . . .
I reject your burnt offerings,

I refuse to look at your sacrifice of fattened cattle.
Let me hear no more of the din of your chanting,
No more strumming on your harps . . .
Just let justice flow like water
And integrity like an unending stream.
(Amos 5:21–24)

These words from Amos make you think that God intended a very different meaning for society and divine worship than what we now have. Justice, most of us believe, is when we send bad guys to jail! We imagine that we can point out the few who get caught and that then we can think of ourselves as a fair society. But we don't dare convict the whole system of massive injustice and deceit. Maybe we are refusing to carry both guilt and responsibility? Taking responsibility for the common good is the more important moral mandate. And that is exactly where the prophets began. When the common good is the focus, preaching is not about imposing guilt and shame on individuals, but about giving vision and encouragement to society. Perhaps that is why Jesus's most common metaphor for the end times was a wedding banquet, not threats of hellfire and punishment.

What history has needed is a positive and inspiring universal vision for the earth and the people of God. Harping about individual sin and criminal convictions might shame a few individuals into halfhearted obedience, but in terms of societal change it has been a notorious Christian failure. Such an emphasis has backfired because it was not founded in a positive love and appreciation of the good, the true, and the beautiful in the world or in creation. Our shaming of human beings has simply produced an ocean of blowback from folks who already

think they are unworthy. Negative energy feeds on itself, but positive energy evokes a positive vision.

So what is Amos's positive vision? When you read the way he ends his prophecy, you can see that the rewards and rejoicing are very much based in this earth and this world. Isn't that what a shepherd and pruner of trees would understand?

Harvest will follow directly after plowing,
the treading of grapes immediately after sowing,
when the mountains will run with new wine and
the hills will flow with it.
I mean to restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
They will rebuild their ruined cities and live in
them,
plant vineyards and drink their wine, dig gardens
and eat their produce.
I will plant them in their own country, never to be
rooted up again,
out of the land I have given them.
(Amos 9:13–15, JB)

There is so much earth-based positivity, human joy, and consciousness of God's love in these statements. When you "let justice flow like water and integrity like an unending stream" (5:24, JB), there is little time left for guilt about all the petty so-called sins that came to preoccupy us for most of Christian history.

Radical unity with God and neighbor is the only way any of us truly heals or improves. Perhaps that is why Alcoholics Anonymous continues to make such an enduring difference in people's lives, while serving as a prophetic critique of Sunday,

go-to-church Christianity. AA insists on personal responsibility for woundedness, the inner experience of a Higher Power, and some kind of ongoing small-group practice. The whole package of healthy religion, you might say.

By his final verses, Amos sees God as more merciful and more compassionate, even as he continues to lament Israel's foolishness and failures:

That day I will re-erect the tottering hut of David,
Make good the gaps in it,
Restore the ancient ruins,
And rebuild its ancient ruins. (Amos 9:11)

Amos is inaugurating a revolution in our understanding of how divine love operates among us. This is no longer retribution or punishment, but a full reordering. It is such divine extravagance, a philosophy of *love them into loving me back*, that sets the pattern for all the prophets to follow. He represents a strong and clear movement away from retribution and punishment to what will become a new covenant of restorative justice that we will see worked out in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and, of course, in the life of Jesus. This changes everything, or at least it should.

KEEP READING