



THE STORY



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Scripture: The Story—Chapter 15-Prophets

Since this is an Olympic year, with the Winter Olympics set to begin in a matter of weeks in South Korea, I thought I would share an Olympic story. If you are a runner, perhaps you are aware of the origins of the 26.2 mile Marathon Race held during the Summer Olympics. As the legend goes, in 490 BC, in the midst of a war, the badly outnumbered Greeks somehow managed to drive back the opposing forces, the Persians who had invaded their coastal plain of Marathon.

A Greek by the name of Pheidippides was dispatched from the battlefield to Athens to deliver the news of a Greek victory. After running about 26 miles to the Acropolis, he burst into the chambers of the gathered officials and addressed his countrymen with, *Victory! Victory! Rejoice, we conquer!* Then he collapsed from exhaustion and died. Which just reinforces the reason why I don't run, it can be bad for your health. But this story actually does go a little deeper. Pheidippides was not randomly chosen for this 26 mile errand. He was one of the men in the Greek army known as a day-long runner or a messenger. This is what he did. As you can imagine during this time in history, there was no internet, no facetime, and no email. In fact, there were no telephones or fax machines, no telegraphs. There were no airplanes or cars, or bicycles.

The way a message was relayed across distances was through written documents or word of mouth delivered by a messenger who often covered incredible distances on foot, over rocky and mountainous terrain, even forgoing sleep if need be to ensure the news is delivered.

The real reason Pheidippides died of exhaustion after delivering the message of victory to the Greek leaders was not because of the 26 mile run. That would have been a walk in the park to him. More

probably, it was because just a short time before this, he had to run from Athens to Sparta to gather Spartan troops to aid in the Battle of Marathon. That was a distance of 150 miles. After a short nap and a bite to eat, he turned around and ran back. Another 150 miles and this was not at a Sunday afternoon leisurely jog pace. There was urgency to his mission which meant he needed to move swiftly. If he would have failed in this 300 mile trek, the Battle of Marathon, one of the most critical conflicts in their history, would have been lost by the Greeks.

The Marathon race is included in the Olympics because to the Greeks, there is nothing more noble than dying after performing a heroic deed for one's country. That was the role of the messenger in the ancient culture.

I wonder, who are our messengers today? Those dedicated individuals trustworthy enough to ensure that important news gets delivered in an accurate and timely manner. Three decades ago, TV news anchorman Walter Cronkite was referred to as the most trusted man in America. When he reported something, people listened and believed him.

And media outlets today still try to portray this idea of being trusted messengers. Does anyone know CNN's slogan? They say they are "the most trusted name in news". But that may not be saying a lot. In this era of "Fake News" the public is more skeptical of mainstream media outlets than any point in history.

So, who are our trusted messengers? Apparently not that Hawaiian Emergency Management employee who pressed the wrong button and sent this message via social media throughout the Hawaiian Islands last Saturday. "ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill".

Apparently, that kind of stirred things up in paradise for a little while.

Who are our messengers? Is it our politicians? Our civic leaders? Wikipedia? Facebook? I mean they even have an app called messenger. Is it our doctors? Our lawyers? What about our churches in our world today? Do we trust our church leaders and pastors as messengers in 2018? Who do you trust to convey accurate, trustworthy information?

If you have been with us at North Park over the past several months, you know that we are on a journey as an entire church. We are studying God's plan and purpose for humanity, and the world. And we are using as our resource, the book called, *The Story*, which is really just scripture. Genesis right through to Revelation arranged in chronological order and it sets out God's "*Upper Story*" and then our place in it, the "*Lower Story*". Last week in Chapter 14, you may remember that the great nation of Israel that God was building and using to bring his people back to him, divided. It split in two because of the sin and disobedience of the people and their leaders. Instead of worshipping God alone, they were worshipping other gods, idols and that led to disunity among the people and it fractured the Kingdom into two. Israel to the north and Judah to the south. And both Kingdoms had a succession of terrible kings that just led the people further into idolatry and further away from God. And that is where we find ourselves as we come to chapter 15 today, entitled interestingly enough, *God's Messengers*.

Way before Pheidippides ran from Marathon to declare victory for the Greeks, God too had messengers. Someone he used to communicate his message of truth to the world. Perhaps they are more familiar to us, as Prophets and we read about many of God's Prophets in the Old Testament. People such as Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel among others. They were also known as "seers" because God seemed to give them special spiritual insight into situations or circumstances. These Prophets or messengers came from a variety of different backgrounds. They spoke to different audiences, in different periods of time and they possessed their own unique styles and personalities. And many lived harsh, lonely lives. It came with the call.

Two things were consistent for all of God's Messengers. Firstly, they were called by God, and secondly, they were required to deliver a message from God to his people accurately. During the time in history when the Kingdom of Israel was divided, the people appeared to turn a deaf ear to God so he sent messengers, his prophets to be his mouthpiece and in many cases, they spoke words of warning and judgement on the people.

Carolyn and I had a prophet, a messenger speak into our lives this week. She was the tech support person from a telecommunications company that provided the internet modem in our home. She was helping us with a problem we were having and eventually she asked if she could put us on hold while she checked something with her supervisor. She came back on the line a short time later and started with these words, *while I have some good news and I have some bad news*. Prophetic words. Harsh words of truth that we needed to hear even if we didn't want to. In short, we needed a new modem, bad news. But the good news was that they could deliver it the next day. Which really was more bad news. What were we going to do with a day without internet? First world problems, I know.

During the time of the divided Kingdom. Amos was a Prophet sent by God with a message. Even though the book of Amos comes near the end of the Old Testament in the bible. The story of Amos actually occurs during the time of the Divided Kingdom recorded in 1 and 2 Kings in the bible. That is what we mean by *The Story* being arranged in chronological order.

If you have your bibles, I invite you to turn to Amos 1 or in your books you can turn to page 213 of Chapter 15. Here's the thing. The chapter spends a lot of time talking about the more well-known prophets during this time, Elijah and Elisha and they are ones we tend to preach about the most. In fact, I just preached about Elijah this past summer. So instead, today, I wanted to draw our attention to one of the prophets that gets a little less fanfare, but can still teach us so much, Amos. What do we know about Amos?

Amos 1:1 or page 213

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel

two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel.

Amos' name literally means, *burden or burden bearer*, very appropriate for this Prophet. He came from the rugged region of Tekoa which was located about 20 kilometres south of Jerusalem, about the distance from London to Talbotville. If you remember my drawing from last week, you will recognize that if Tekoa was close to Jerusalem that means it is in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. And Amos was a shepherd and he also tended fig trees. He was a man of the land, a farmer and he was a man after God's heart. But he had no outstanding features that qualified him to be a prophet, except that God called him and did you notice where he called him to?

Amos 1:1

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa—the vision he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake.

God gave Amos visions and insight into the spiritual condition of Israel, the Northern Kingdom. Even though Amos was from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, God is calling him to take a road trip, probably to Bethel, which was the religious centre of the Kingdom of Israel.

Jeroboam was the King at the time but this is not the same Jeroboam that we talked about last week. The time of Amos is about 760 BC which is about 170 years after the first Jeroboam ruled but things have only gotten worse. And God is not pleased.

Amos 1:2

He said:

*“The LORD roars from Zion
and thunders from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds dry up,
and the top of Carmel withers.”*

These are harsh words that depict God as a ferocious lion ready to spring and devour and you have to wonder how the people responded, don't you? Here we have this country bumpkin, a nobody from south of the border who comes and plants himself in the middle of Bethel, the religious hub of

Israel and starts spouting off words that he attributes to God.

At verse 3, Amos says, *This is what the Lord says:* He assured the people that he is speaking for God. And they must be thinking, *Have you lost his mind? Who do you think you are!?*

God's prophets were always misunderstood. Then Amos starts condemning and pronouncing judgement on nation after nation around Israel's borders. Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, even Judah. And if you are in the crowd that is beginning to gather around Amos as he is speaking, you probably begin to agree with him. *Yeah, Preach it brother, Amen.* Remember, these nations he is ripping into were all enemies of Israel. Amos had probably won over the audience with these harsh words condemning their actions.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation like this? Someone is criticizing or reprimanding a person or a group of people around you and you're just relieved it's not you so you start thinking, *yeah, they deserve it. Keep going. Preach!*

I remember the first time I had to go to the principal's office. I was in grade 1. Already a delinquent in the making. In my day, elementary school principals were scary dudes. Mr. Chalmers, he was big and it was the late 60's so he had the long sideburns and a vein that always seemed to bulge out of his neck. And we used to hear rumours of kids that were sent to his office never to be seen again.

I was called to Mr. Chalmers office one spring morning with three of my classmates. I remember it like it was yesterday. And we were shaking because we weren't really sure why we were there. And he asked us, *do you know why you are here?* And we said, *No Sir, no sir*, which just seem to make the vein in his neck pop out further. And that's when he mentioned Mary Kathryn Liddle and we sunk down in our chairs. See the day before after school, the four of us had been walking home. One of my buddies reached to the ground and picked up a dead mouse by it's tail and he threw it at one of us. Then we all started tossing it at each other. What else are you going to do with a dead mouse when you are seven years old!?! I think if we would have left it at

that, there would have been no problem. The real issue came when another classmate, Mary Kathryn Liddle walked past us and one of the boys threw the mouse at her. She did not receive the attention well. She screamed, fell down, ripped her leotards and ran back to the school. We didn't think anything of it, we were grade 1 boys! Until the next day, when we were called down to the principal's office. He asked who threw the mouse at Mary Kathryn and we all pointed at Alan. Loyalty ends in the principal's office.

Mr. Chalmers just got down in Alan's face and let him have it, until tears were streaming down his cheeks. I was thinking, better him than me. He shouldn't have thrown it at her! But then, the principal moved to the next boy, Bruce and did the same thing. Then the next boy, Don, same thing until he got to me. He leaned in close to me. I have never seen such a big, red face in all my life and he unleashed his fury. Four boys walked out of the principal's office that day in tears and with three day detentions.

The Israelites around Amos on this day, probably cheered his words against the other enemy nations because they deserved it. Amos even condemned his own homeland Judah but then he turns the tables and this messenger of God pronounces judgement on these very people listening to him on this day, the Israelites. Their smug demeanour soon changes.

Look at what Amos says about Israel. Listen to the list of charges God had against these people.

Amos 2:6-8

This is what the LORD says:

*“For three sins of Israel,
even for four, I will not relent.*

*They sell the innocent for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.*

*⁷ They trample on the heads of the poor
as on the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.*

*Father and son use the same girl
and so profane my holy name.*

*⁸ They lie down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge.*

*In the house of their god
they drink wine taken as fines.*

Were you able to pick out the concerns that God has with his people from that list?

Through his messenger, the prophet Amos, God condemned Israel for five specific sins,

1. Selling the poor as slaves.
2. Exploiting the poor
3. Engaging in Sexual immorality
4. Taking illegal collateral for loans-(more exploitation of poor)
5. Worshipping idols

Like Mr. Chalmers did to me after I thought his wrath would only be directed at Alan. He leaned in close and lowered the boom and the truth is, I wasn't blameless. I had only pictured myself that way, don't we all? That is what Amos does to the Israelites. The Messenger, the prophet lowers the boom. They have disobeyed God and his commands and their actions are deserving of punishment. Let me tell you a little bit about Israel during the time of Amos. Even though they had gone through a split, even though their Kings were leading them further and further away from God, the land was prosperous. There was peace. No battles were being waged against enemy nations and the economy was booming. People were building larger and more elaborate homes even using costly ivory in some of the features. Much like our granite and marble today. The governments were launching major civic initiatives and the skyline more and more was dotted with larger and more grandiose buildings. Times were good economically, for some people. But not all. The gap between those who were rich and those who were poor was large and it was growing. There was no middle class in Israel in this day, you were either very rich or you were very poor.

This is what I have discovered through my research this week. It is not a good thing for a society to have these polar extremes with nothing in the middle to stabilize it. Do you know that over the last thirty years both Canada and the US have had a declining middle class? The gap between the rich and the poor is growing. According to most economists and sociologists, that isn't a good thing in a society. Because it tips the playing field. Those who more affluent in the culture have a decided advantage. Without the middle class, the poor's accessibility to

opportunities to help move ahead are limited or non-existent.

And the situation just perpetuates itself because the rich are the ones who have access to the positions of power and prestige. They are the ones who make laws that tend to generate more wealth and privilege for themselves and further oppresses the poor. This has the potential to create much civil unrest and despair for those who are trying to work themselves out of their plight but their efforts are never rewarded.

Perhaps you have heard about or read about countries in our world today whose government, policies and laws are constructed more and more to favour the rich. That can be a dangerous practice for the overall stability and vitality of the country. That was the circumstance in Israel during the time of Amos. Things seemed very prosperous but there was this widening gap between the rich and the poor and it created an environment of entitlement and spiritual apathy. Rich people tend to rely less on God because they were comfortable. They had their things! The poor were being badly mistreated and the laws and commands of God were being ignored.

Make no mistake about it, Amos was directing his words to the upper class in Israel. Amos, the lowly sheep herder and fig tree farmer from a little town outside of Jerusalem is calling out the elite. That would be like a bean farmer from Zurich, Ontario standing on the steps of the Parliament buildings in Ottawa, give them a piece of his mind.

Except here, Amos is a messenger of God. He is called to speak God's truth. He is not just venting here. He is proclaiming God's judgement on the people for their behaviour. A people who had no love for their neighbour, who took advantage of others and who only looked out for their own concerns. More than any other book in the bible, Amos holds God's people accountable for their ill treatment of others. It repeatedly points out the failure of the Israelites to fully embrace God's ideas of justice, mercy and grace. The rich were taking advantage of slave labour to fill their pockets. They were selling off needy people for goods and oppressing the poor. The men were using women immorally for their own whims and pleasures. Selfish, selfish, selfish.

Intoxicated by their own economic success, the people Amos is addressing had lost their concept of love and compassion for others, specifically those in a different socio-economic class. Amos rebuked them because he saw in this way of life, evidence that they had completely forgotten the ways of God.

Oh externally, they looked like they had it all together with their Rolex watches, designer togas and Gucci purses. Outwardly, they exuded success but their inner lives were sinking into a pit of moral and spiritual decay. Rather than seeking out opportunities to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly. Instead, they embraced their arrogance. Their self-righteousness. Their materialism. And Amos communicated God's utter disdain for the hypocritical lives of his people. And do you know where their hypocrisy was most evident to God?

It was in their religious services. Six days a week, they lived for themselves and their own wants and needs and then they would gather for their worship service, and go through the motions.

Listen to what God has to say about their empty platitudes.

Amos 5:21-23

*"I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.*

*²² Even though you bring me burnt
offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.*

*Though you bring choice fellowship
offerings,*

I will have no regard for them.

²³ Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

God hates, false worship by people just going through the motions or those doing it for show. His desire is for humble, sincere and contrite hearts, not the songs of hypocrites. I could go on and on but I think you get the idea. As I told you, Amos lowered the boom! In fact, unlike the other prophets in the bible, who interspersed redemption and restoration into their messages to the Israelites, Amos had little. He devoted only the final five verses of his entire message, covered in 9 chapters of the bible, to any sort of hopeful resolution. This is how bad things were in this day.

Unfortunately, for the most part, the Israelites failed to heed the warnings of Amos. They continued in their ways and a short time later they were routed by the Assyrians and taken into exile. That is a story for another day.

You can tell a lot about a country by the way they treat their poor, can't you? You can tell a lot about a city by the way they treat their poor, can't you? You can tell a lot about an individual by the way they treat the poor, can't you?

Here's the thing and this is why we are preaching through *The Story*, so we can see how it all fits together. If we go all the way back to the beginning, to the book of Genesis, when God created humanity. He created us to flourish and prosper and he allowed us to enjoy material prosperity. But it is during those times of prosperity that the people of God are called to embodied his character and extend mercy, compassion and generosity to those in need. During the time of Amos, in Israel and Judah, times were good economically for most of the people of God, but instead of reaching out, they hoarded it for themselves. They were self-centred, cold hearted, bigoted and sexually immoral. All these, are symptoms of their hearts far from God. It was most evident in the way that they worshipped, all show and no action.

Do you know what I have been convicted of this week as I have prepared this message? I wondered if that little ole shepherd and fig farmer from Tekoa came and stood here in our foyer or on our stage, what would Amos say to us? What message would he bring from God to North Park Church? What message would he bring to you and to me on the way we are living and the way we are worshipping? Because, if I could so bold as to suggest and maybe you notice this too, our North America culture, specifically Canada and the US in 2018, doesn't seem to be a lot different than Israel 760 BC. Think of the stories that made the news over the last year or so.

In London:

*The economy is good, homes are being built in record numbers in London.

*BRT, bus rapid transit, the single largest infrastructure project in London history is being proposed at a cost of over \$1/2 billion

*In his annual State of the Union address last week, London Mayor Matt Brown highlighted that "London has attracted \$250 million in investment in the past three years, creating 5,000 jobs,"

Times are good.

But what about the:

*The Opioid crisis. In fact, in the London Free Press in September, 2017, it said, *In only two other cities in the country are more people per capita going to hospital for opioid overdose than London — yet another sign not enough is being done to fight the scourge*

*What about the crisis of enough hospital beds and treatment for those with mental health issues in our region?

*What about the crisis of our regional jail, that is overcrowded and understaffed?

*What about our homeless crisis? In a study released in November 2017, it states that in London, 60% of the homeless are chronically homeless, that means they are staying in shelters longer than ever before. 13 per cent of those who stayed in shelter were 17 years old or younger, unheard of in the past.

*What about the increase in minimum wage and the outcry that followed especially towards larger corporations that cut back staff or benefits?

*What about the #metoo movement that has shone the light on sexual assault and harassment in the work place?

How are we, you and me, North Park, a prosperous, middle to upper class church, although make no mistake we have poor amongst us, how are we reaching out to the poor and the disenfranchised in our city and world? Injustice permeates our land. Are we as the Church standing up against issues of injustice or are we turning a blind eye? Saying it is for someone else to figure out. Acts of social justice are an important part of what it means to take the gospel of Jesus Christ out into our world.

What would Amos say to us? Do a brief scan of our bulletin and our web page and you will see that an integral part of our ministry at North Park is reaching out in places in London like 1750 Huron, LRC and Boulee Street.

The importance of acts of social justice and the gospel are why we host an entire elementary school, Lord Elgin in our gym for a Christmas meal.

It is why we focus our giving at Christmas to the Dare to Give bags for Mission Services and invite North Park small groups and families into service throughout the year at Mission Services, Ark Aid and New Life Prison Ministry among other places. It is why we support Assyrian Refugees. It is why we host ESL programs and fund IJM projects for citizenships Thailand. It is why we have host families for the Teen Challenge guys once a month.

Preaching, praying and worshipping are central to a Christian's life, but they ring hollow when we aren't also loving, caring and serving those in need in our community. Many of you are reaching and serving the least of the least in our world. I am humbled by your example.

Just last week an eight-year girl from North Park that Carolyn teaches piano, showed her some crafts she is making. Then she told Carolyn that she is selling them to raise money for the poor through Mission Services. Don't you love that? Many of you are involved in our community in similar ways.

You know another messenger came to the Middle East region 750 years after Amos. He came to a world that was not unlike Israel and not unlike London 2018. This messenger not only spoke for God, he was God's own son, Jesus. Do you know what his central message was? It may be different than you think.

Matthew 6:33

Jesus said to those wanted to follow him,
*But seek first his kingdom and his
righteousness, and all these things will be
given to you as well.*

To be followers of Jesus is to seek after God's Kingdom first in our lives. It is to let go of whatever is getting in the way, our sin.

What are the attributes of the Kingdom of God? Things like, love, forgiveness, grace, mercy and compassion. Aren't they counter to the attributes and values of the Kingdom of our world which seems to tell us to just look after #1, ourselves?

We have been recipients of God's love and mercy and with the power of his spirit at work in us, he has given us a mission.

WE are now the Messengers! God has called us, followers of Jesus to be his messengers. Yes, to take the truth of his love and mercy out into our world and pass it along to whoever he puts in our lives. But, he has also called us to be advocates, to step in and be the voice for those who have no voice in our society especially those who are poor, oppressed, the least of the least. Because they are not them, they are us!

So how do we respond? With apathy and a shrug of the shoulders as we go back to singing our songs. Or do we open our hearts to the plight of those around us? Read the bulletin, look at our web page, read the newspaper.

There are lots of opportunities to get involved, to lace up the running shoes, like Pheidippides and take the Good News of the Kingdom of God out into our world, through word and deed. It is an important message, a live saving message. How will we respond? What will you do? Are you in? Are you up for the challenge to be a messenger for Jesus out into our world?

Points to Ponder

THE STORY- Chapter 15

Prophets: God's Messengers

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Who are the messengers in our culture today whom we trust to get important news to us? Do you think that the Christian church is seen as a respected and trusted messenger in our society?
2. Have you ever had a "Prophet" speak words of prophecy to you? What was that experience like for you? What was the result?
3. Do you think our affluent culture makes it more difficult to follow Jesus with our whole hearts? Why or why not?
4. The Bible states clearly that God/Jesus had a special affinity for the poor. Why do you think that is the case?
5. Talk about the City of London and your observations of it. Are you aware of the poor and disenfranchised in our city? What is the general opinion of those in your community to those in need? Have you ever volunteered in some capacity to assist the poor? Share your experiences.
6. Has your small group ever considered serving those in need, together? Brainstorm some acts of social justice that you could do as a group.

Prayer and Action Item:

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Perhaps pray that God would give you eyes to see those in need in your community. Invite the Holy Spirit to give you the same compassion as Jesus for the poor and maybe open up opportunities to be involved in some acts of social justice.