

Editorial



A Famine of the Word?

PREACHING RECENTLY IN LUTHER SEMINARY CHAPEL, PROFESSOR NUHA KHOURY of Bethlehem University brought new life to the prophet Amos. She spoke as though she knew him personally—a fellow countryman, a man from a nearby village, who addressed issues of her own immediate experience: economic injustice, the victimization of entire cultures by financial power brokers bent on making the world safe for investors, a world silent about the suffering of others.

This is not a political agenda or ideology, Dr. Khoury proclaimed, it is the word of the Lord. Repent! A powerful message, especially for those who remember the consequences of failing to hear Amos's cry (God's cry!) that "justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24): "I hate...your festivals," says the Lord, "and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies" (5:21). "I will send a famine on the land: not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). It's a simple justice issue apparently, a clear case of tit for tat: no justice, no worship; no righteousness, no preaching; no feeding of the hungry, no feeding of the soul.

The question, then, apropos of the theme of this issue on preaching, is whether we should be preaching at all. Dare we conduct religious business as usual when we fail so dismally at hearing what God actually calls us to do?

We need to take the question seriously. We are willing to enter a hundred safer discussions about whether preaching is passé for an audience raised on MTV, whether preaching is possible in a postmodern world, whether proclamation must not give way to didactic lessons among people who are biblically illiterate and skeptical of authority. What about the harder question: Are preaching and worship dangerous to our souls if all we are doing is providing a certain measure of religious therapy to more-or-less vaguely troubled moderns, if we overlook the personal, social, and eschatological claims of the kingdom? Dare we continue?

No, says Malachi, better "that someone among you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not kindle fire on my altar in vain!" (Mal 1:10). No, says Isaiah, "Trample my courts no more....I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity" (Isa 1:13). No, says the psalmist, "What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips?...Mark this...or I will tear you apart" (Ps 50:16, 22). No, says Jesus, "Beware of practicing your piety before others" (Matt 6:1).

The prophetic tradition—including Jesus—is deadly serious here: better no worship at all than worship that serves only the self, even the religious self. Better a hiatus in the word than endless words that merely soothe or advise, and do not liberate or convict the hearer in the name of Jesus.

Moreover—and this is the hard part—maybe even no more *faithful* worship, as a mark of repentance or a symbolic act of protest, if the church in a particular

time and place fails to be a sign and a messenger of the kingdom of God. Worst of all, as Amos warned, is the possibility that God might just shut us down. Sometimes I have wondered, for example, what might have happened in Northern Ireland if both Pope and Protestants had said, "These churches are closed! There will be no more worship while the killing lasts, for God forbids it." It's easier to apply this principle "over there," to be sure. But what about us? We are as unfaithful as anyone else—trapped in our comforts or ideologies.

Besides, isn't preaching exactly the gift God gives us to break through our various infidelities and Babylonian captivities? Isn't the two-edged sword of the word just what we need? So what will we do to heed the prophetic challenge? Mere business as usual won't work. It never will for the prophets. At the very least, we are called to a preaching that matters, that proclaims the gospel pure and the law undiluted, that is honed as sharp as the words of the prophets themselves, that calls us out of ourselves and into the world in the name of God.

We may also be called at times to distinguish between preaching in and out of regular worship. Amos decried vain worship, but his decrial was itself a sermon. He preached; he just didn't do it in the temple. Is this a model? There may be times when it will commend itself. If we come to be defined by our stance in the worship wars, is the solution perhaps no worship at all? If we tolerate religious escapism as though it were the gospel, should we not hear the growl of God's wrath and flee the premises? If we give in to our propensity to care more about defining truth than doing it, are we not condemned? If we are content to come down on the esthetic side of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, should we not simply give up on a worship that has become idolatrous anyway? I don't know how seriously I mean this prescription, but I have no doubt that the prophets meant it absolutely. We worry about unworthy eating and drinking in the sacrament for a variety of reasons with a variety of import. For Amos, unworthy drinking (while others went thirsty) meant no more sacrament because God would shut off the wine supply (Amos 5:11). A famine of the word, a failure of the wine—a terrifying notion.

No easy solution here. The prophets are hard. The threat is real. Second Timothy offers a different counsel: no hiatus, but a no less solemn and strangely relevant command:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully. (2 Tim 4:1-5)

F.J.G.