

Amos 5:21-24

Faith & Flourishing in Politics: Speak Prophetically

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / November 21st, 2021

On the morning of Thursday, February 3rd, 1994, a room of political and religious elite gathered in the ballroom of a swanky hotel in downtown Washington DC. Members of Congress were there, as was the President and Vice President, Bill Clinton and Al Gore, Hilary too. But there was also someone there you might not expect, Mother Teresa.

An 83-year-old nun from India, Mother Teresa had spent a lifetime caring for the poor and needy in the slums of Calcutta, the malnourished and thrown away. She'd received the Noble Peace Prize in 1979, but she still didn't fit the suits and ties in that room with her humble blue and white nun's habit. But today was the National Prayer Breakfast, and they had invited Mother Teresa to speak.¹

And when Mother Teresa got up to talk, you could barely see her head over the podium, engraved with the Presidential Seal of the United States. And two big black microphones rested right on her forehead.² You couldn't see her face until she turned to the side. But although she looked frail, she spoke with power.

She began by talking about the importance of love and how, starting with the family, we are to live lives of love for God and neighbor. But we're not to just say we love God, but to show it by sacrificing for our neighbor. Mother Teresa called her audience to "be willing to give until it hurts."³ And something about that rang true, didn't it? Because she had lived a life of giving until it hurt.

That gave weight to her next words as she spoke out prophetically against children putting their parents in nursing homes and forgetting them, as she spoke out against boys and girls taking drugs, and as she spoke out against abortion. She said, "But I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because Jesus said, 'If you receive a little child, you receive me.'"⁴ Long and resounding applause filled the ballroom.

If you were in that room behind that podium surrounded by some of the most powerful men and women in the world, would you speak truth to power? Would you speak prophetically? That's what "S" in "F.L.O.U.R.I.S.H" stands for, "Speak Prophetically." Most of us are never going to have a chance to do what Mother Teresa did. But we do have opportunities every day, small opportunities to speak prophetically, to speak truth to power in our contexts, in our families, jobs, and communities. Maybe if we are faithful in those little moments, God will call us to speak up in the big moments too.⁵

During the Ockenga Fellows Program, we talked about the concept of "faithful presence." My black brothers and sisters in Christ pointed out that sometimes Christians need to speak up and advocate for justice, even specific policies. Believers need to exercise not just "faithful presence" but "faithful prophetic presence."⁶ We need to be faithful to Jesus, present where he has us and speak with boldness and courage. Faithful presence can be too passive.⁷ Sometimes faithful presence needs prophetic power.

To speak prophetically is to speak truth to power.

The Hebrew Bible is full of the writings of prophets and stories of prophets speaking God's truth to the powers that be, whether governors and kings or cities and nations. To speak prophetically sometimes meant "future-telling," but most often, it meant "truth-telling." Not just, "This is going to happen in the future," but "Here are the consequences that are going to happen if you break God's laws." The prophets were God's covenant lawyers who reminded his people of the terms of their covenant agreement. If you honor and obey

me, I will bless you, but I will curse you if you dishonor and disobey me.⁸ The prophets didn't speak their own truth but God's truth to those in authority and the people as a whole.

We find many examples of prophets speaking God's truth to power throughout the Old Testament, Samuel to King Saul, Nathan to King David, Elijah to King Ahab, Isaiah to King Ahaz and Hezekiah, and our prophet today Amos to king Jeroboam II of northern Israel. But we also find other people speaking truth to power, and thus speaking prophetically, who weren't necessarily prophets, like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego with King Nebuchadnezzar and Esther with King Xerxes.

When the evil Haman plotted mass genocide against the Jews, God sovereignly directed a young Jewish woman named Esther to become the king's wife. Her uncle Mordecai recognized that God had put her in her position for "such a time as this."⁹ What if she remained silent? God would have raised someone else, but many Jews may have perished. The New Testament author James likewise says:

James 4:17 (ESV)

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

James says that part of being a follower of Jesus is recognizing opportunities to do good and taking them. Could that include speaking up for those who can't speak for themselves? If we see our government hurting the common good and working against shalom and flourishing, shouldn't we say something? Could we go so far as to ask if not speaking up is a form of disobeying Jesus' command to love our neighbor? Wouldn't silence in our democratic context mean we missed an opportunity to do good, as James says?

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, ". . . the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people."¹⁰ Appalling silence! As MLK stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, he delivered his prophetic speech, "I Have a Dream." In his speech, he spoke of black poverty, voting rights, police brutality, and biblical justice.¹¹ As he preached, he quoted the prophet, Amos.

Amos 5:24 (ASV)

"But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

Biblical justice and biblical righteousness are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have a just community without a right relationship with God or a right relationship with God without a just community.¹² MLK understood justice and righteousness are a pair and spoke for both as he stood on the Washington Mall and met privately with President Lyndon B. Johnson to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The prophet Amos wasn't a professional prophet. He wasn't what we might call ordained clergy today—no "Rev." in his title. Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa. God can use anyone to speak his truth to power, and that is what Amos did. Even though Amos lived in Southern Judah near Jerusalem, God gave him a message for six outside nations. Amos preached against Damascus (Aram), Gaza (Philistines), Tyre (Phoenicia), Edom, Ammon, and Moab for their violence, their slavery, their wicked religious practices, and their abuses of pregnant women. Amos not only speaks truth to outside nations, but his own as well, to Judah for breaking God's covenant and to northern Israel for oppressing the poor, weak, and vulnerable.¹³

Amos spent most of his prophetic message addressing the northern tribe of Israel, and for his faithfulness to God, he was called a conspirator (Amos 7:10). Amos dared to speak directly against the king of Samaria, Jeroboam II. And for that, a false priest named Amaziah, a priest at Bethel where the Israelites had erected a golden calf told Amos to go home (c.f., 1 Kings 12:25-33).

Amos 7:12-13 (ESV)

And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and

prophesy there, 13 but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

“Stay away from the king and temple because you’re threatening our civil religion!” The palace and temple combine to form a new idolatrous religion. Civil religion is when a state enmeshes itself in religion, and religion embraces the state to extend both their power. The consequence for Israel and any nation that does this is a watered-down faith and injustices.¹⁴ God called Amos to speak out against Israel's religious and political corruption, and he calls us to speak out against a politicized faith and injustices in our context today. Without separation from the state, the church can’t speak prophetically to the state.

One of the biggest supporters of apartheid in South Africa was the Reformed Church. They created theological arguments defending the division of land among the races and then persecuted those who spoke out against it.¹⁵ That’s not so different from many churches in the south during slavery. Or how about the faith leaders on both sides of the political aisle, who, once they’ve endorsed a political candidate, find it difficult to speak out against immoral activity or unjust policies?¹⁶ Amos is confronting the same religious and political mixing of powers in his time, and while it’s intimidating, he doesn’t do it alone.

To speak prophetically is to speak truth to power with power.

God empowers the prophet Amos to deliver a prophetic rebuke. Amos isn’t rebuking the nations and the king of Israel because of his own innate sense of justice, but because God has communicated to him true justice. Amos has a higher mandate than a political party or social cause. He has the word of God. The phrase “says the Lord” appears 21 times in Amos’s nine chapters. Amos makes clear this message didn’t come from him but God. When the false priest Amaziah tries to send Amos packing, he points to God’s calling:

Amos 7:14-15 (ESV)

Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. 15 But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”

God sent Amos. Amos is not speaking in his own power, but God has empowered him. If it was up to Amos, he might still be with his sheep. God might call you to speak truth to power. He might call you into politics in our city, state, or nation or to speak up at a smaller level for an injustice you see at school or even in your own family. You might think, “I could never do that,” but if God has called you, he will empower you with his Holy Spirit and God’s word to say what he wants you to say.¹⁷ God gives prophetic power.

But you will also need to check yourself. Are you speaking your personal opinion or God’s words? For us to speak prophetically is not to speak my truth, but God’s truth grounded in scripture. Something I noticed about Mother Teresa’s speech was that it was full of scripture. She paraphrased verses from Matthew, John, 1 John, and Isaiah 11 times.¹⁸ Her prophetic message didn’t come from watching an abundance of YouTube videos, or reading New York Times articles, or even from listening to the Holy Post podcast (a personal favorite), but was an overflow of her love for scripture. When we claim to speak prophetically, how many of us are actually speaking God’s truth directed by the Holy Spirit, not just personal opinions?

I still believe in the prophetic office in the New Testament.¹⁹ I don’t think prophets today create scripture as Amos did, but part of their role, apart from future-telling, is to remind people of Jesus’ new covenant and the way we’re supposed to live by it outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. We hold ourselves, our churches, and our politicians up to the flame of Matthew 5-7 and call us all to love God, neighbor, and enemy.

Just like we need wisdom to set public policy, we need the Holy Spirit to help us determine when to speak prophetically. But I think sometimes we try to speak prophetically in the public square without actually being called by the Holy Spirit to do so. It’s so easy for righteous zeal to turn into self-righteous anger.

James 1:19-20 (ESV)

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

It's so easy to convince ourselves that we're mad because God is mad. But James warns us to slow down because our anger isn't the same as God's anger.

“The problem with carnal anger and outrage is that it's one of the easiest sins to commit while convincing oneself that one is being faithful. . . . Rage is no sign of authority, prophetic or otherwise.”²⁰ – *Onward* by Russell Moore

The power of prophetic power is not anger or rage but the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit empowers our speech, it should be accompanied by the fruit of the Spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience...” (Galatians 5:22-23). Watching the video of Mother Teresa, I think that's one of the things that gave her prophetic message so much power. You could see and hear and feel the love she had, the joy, the peace, and the incredible patience. She didn't yell at the President. She encouraged everyone to love each other. And that's why we speak, out of love for others. *To speak prophetically is to speak truth to power with power.*

We speak prophetically out of love for our neighbor.

Let's take a moment to take a bird's-eye view of the book of Amos. If we do, we find that Amos doesn't advocate for himself or the rights of shepherders but for the poor and most vulnerable. He speaks for the good of his neighbors. When Amos first addresses Israel, he rebukes their injustices and unrighteousness:

Amos 2:6-7 (ESV)

Thus says the Lord:

“For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and turn aside the way of the afflicted;
a man and his father go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;

Israel has sold the poor for a pair of sandals. Amos challenges Israel's unbridled materialism, abuse of the poor, their sexual immorality, their religious sacrilege. I wonder what Amos would think of my love of smart technology? Would he point how abusive cobalt mining in the congo makes so many electronic processors possible in cars, phones, and computers?²¹ Amos is not afraid to call out the wealthy, not for having money, but for how they got their riches and what they do with them once they have it.

Amos 4:1 (ESV)

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
who are on the mountain of Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’

Samaria is Israel's capital, and it is full of men and women who crush the poor and drink their fill. They are the kind of people who don't want to see justice done in court, who detest the truth, and who raise taxes on the poor. Though they acquire much, God's wrath will come on them.

Amos 5:10-11 (ESV)

They hate him who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor him who speaks the truth.
Therefore because you trample on the poor
and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

What kind of people would do something like this? Maybe we're thinking, "If only they read their Hebrew Bibles, the Old Testament, they wouldn't act this way. If only they went to church, they'd be good people." Here's the kicker. The people committing injustice are the most religious, which brings us to today's text:

Amos 5:21-24 (ESV)

"I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This should terrify us. Amos rebukes those most like us, church-goers. They're the kind of people who give their tithes and offerings, sing hymns and worship songs, and look like good Christians on the outside. But they have divided righteousness from justice, which corrupts both. God wants our love but also wants us to love our neighbor. And if we don't love our neighbor, we do not love him.

Before the church ever speaks prophetically to the world, we need to make sure we live prophetically in the world. Next week we'll look closer at Jesus' call to care for the poor and needy in Matthew 25. It's good that today we're seeing how the Old Testament prophets took this seriously too. We have to love our neighbor. As we love, we earn the credibility to stand up and address those in positions of authority for not loving their neighbors. Remember how Mother Teresa called out abortion? She added this:

The beautiful gift God has given our congregation is to fight abortion by adoption. [. . .] We have given already from one house in Calcutta, over 3,000 children in adoption. And I can't tell you what joy, what love, what peace those children have brought into those families. It has been a real gift of God for them and for us. [. . .] And also I offer you, since our Sisters are here, anybody who doesn't want the child, please give it to me. I -- I want the child.

I will tell you something beautiful. As I already told you, the abortion by adoption -- by care of the mother and adoption for her baby. We have saved thousands of lives. We have sent word to the clinics, to the hospitals and police stations: "Please don't destroy the child. We will take the child." So we always have someone tell the mothers in trouble: "Come, we will take -- take care of you. We will get a home for your child." [. . .]

Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted and to give that child to married couple who will love the child and be loved by the child.

Mother Teresa's prophetic words have power because she demonstrated love. She was not motivated by a political cause but by love for the neediest. *We speak prophetically out of love for our neighbor.*

Amos's prophetic rebuke was an expression of God's love not just for the Jews but also for the Gentiles, those surrounding nations, Damascus, Edom, and the rest. In the end, Amos prophesied that northern Israel, Samaria, and all the surrounding nations have hope, but only through King David's line in Judah.

Amos 9:11-12 (ESV)

“In that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins
and rebuild it as in the days of old,
that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,”
declares the Lord who does this.

One will come to rescue Israel and Edom and all the nations who repent and seek the Lord.²² A people of injustice and unrighteousness will be counted just and righteous as they call on the name of the king. We know that king, don't we? He is also a prophet who loved us so much he laid down his life for us, his enemy.

Prophetic power comes at the cost of self-sacrificial love.

You want to speak prophetically? Do you know what they did to the prophets? They sawed them in two, stoned them, murdered and mistreated them.²³ They lived lives of sadness and sorrow as they watched God's people disobey and reap the consequences. I think there's this idea that to be prophetic today is to flip tables like Jesus, to get angry and demand justice. Modern-day zeal includes social media attacks, shouting matches, flipping cars, putting a bumper sticker on your car or a yard sign in your lawn, or in my case, buying and wearing a t-shirt that says “Seek justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God. – Micah 6:8” This cost me \$20, but did it really cost me anything? I believe in its message, but it doesn't cost me much.

But when Jesus chased out the unjust money-changers and drove out the animals from the temple, he was provoking the wrath of the chief priests and religious elite so that they would crucify him (John 2:13-22; Matthew 21:12-17).²⁴ He drove out the lambs to become a lamb who could take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Jesus didn't flip tables because he felt marginalized or outraged, but to save us. Love was at the core of his prophetic action and must be the core of ours. Mother Teresa lived a life-of self-sacrificial love till the age of 87, and MLK lived the same till he was assassinated at 39.

Do you Amos's audience heard him and repented and sought God? Not right away. Northern Israel and its capital of Samaria were taken into exile for their sins. But Jesus did tell a parable we usually assume is based on fiction of a Good Samaritan who risked his life for the sake of another, who embodied self-sacrificial love and foreshadowed Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. God used Amos's prophetic ministry in ways he couldn't have imagined. *Prophetic power comes at the cost of self-sacrificial love.*

Benediction - Amos 5:24 (ASV)

“But let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church as part of his Doctor of Ministry research study through Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Spiritual Exercises

Dear Church,

Thank you for listening to my eighth sermon from our *Faith & Flourishing in Politics* series, *Speak Prophetically*. As we consider what it means to practice “faithful prophetic presence” in our contexts, here are a few ways to keep praying and processing:

Journal: Think of your context, your family, workplace, and community. What are some scriptural truths those contexts may need to hear? Do they need to hear more about God’s righteousness, or his justice, or both? How have you spoken prophetically? Journal about that experience. Then, write about some missed opportunities or what you think the Holy Spirit might be asking you to do going forward. Write a prayer asking God for help to speak prophetically, in his timing, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Article: Read “We Need Prophets, Not Partisans” by Brett McCracken posted on *The Gospel Coalition* (March 2, 2020). You will notice many themes we’ve already talked about in our series, like how politics can form us spiritually, the concept of faithful presence, and a warning that being partisan is not being prophetic. McCracken explains what it means to speak prophetically in our world today and why it matters so much.

Listen & Read (sermon & book): Listen to Pastor and author Eugene Cho speak prophetically in his sermon, “Faith & Politics.” YouTube: <https://youtu.be/4PnxqTt4ekk> (37:08) If you resonate with his sermon, you might check out his book, *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk: A Christian’s Guide to Engaging Politics*, which is an intermediate read (240 pages) but well worth the effort. He speaks prophetically throughout the book.

Read (intermediate): You know I like Timothy Keller, right? I recently read *The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God’s Mercy* by Timothy Keller as part of my study of the book of Jonah. This changed the way I see the book of Jonah and helps clarify Christianity’s prophetic presence in politics (256 pages).

Ponder: Here, I’m sharing three different speakers exercising prophetic speech in different ways and from different Christian traditions. Try listening to each one and answer these three questions: 1) What biblical truths are they saying? 2) What things are not as clearly biblical and I may disagree with? 3) How do I feel about the manner in which they speak? Does it make me more or less receptive? Here are the three:

#1 – **Mother Teresa**: This humble nun served the most desperate in the streets of Calcutta, India. Listen as she speaks prophetically to the President of the United States ([YouTube](#); [Manuscript](#)).

#2 – **Martin Luther King, Jr.**: Maybe you’ve heard MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech before. Hear the fire in his voice once again as he advocates for liberty for all people ([YouTube](#); [Manuscript](#)).

#3 – **William Sloan Coffin**: I had not heard of Rev. Coffin until we discussed this interview in the [GCTS](#) Ockenga Fellows cohort. Listen to this UCC Minister’s unabashed point-of-view ([YouTube](#)).

Worship: Listen to “Isaiah 58 + Purge Me” from *Urban Doxology*. If you’d like, you can [read Isaiah 58](#) as the worship leader recites it. Take time to confess before the Lord any injustices you see in the world. Ask the Lord to reveal any participation in injustice in your own life. Praise God for always being just and true.

I know those are a lot of recommendations! I hope the ones you choose will help you love Jesus more and speak God’s truth prophetically as the Holy Spirit empowers and guides.

With love,
Pastor Jonathan Romig

Sermon Slides

See this week's [sermon on our website](#).

Discussion Questions.

Please use these questions in your Sunday school, small group, or other discussion time.

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Endnotes

1. “President Clinton at the National Prayer Breakfast (1994),” clintonlibrary42, YouTube, published August 5, 2016, accessed November 15, 2021 <https://youtu.be/kiagkk3XeFU>. Either a book or podcast mentioned this speech. I cannot remember.

2. “Mother Teresa @ National Prayer Breakfast,” Geremia08, YouTube, published February 14, 2012, accessed November 15, 2021 <https://youtu.be/OXn-wf5ylgo>. Video courtesy CSPAN: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?54274-1/national-prayer-breakfast>.

3. “Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta: National Prayer Breakfast Address, delivered 3 February 1994, Washington Hotel, Washington, D.C.” American Rhetoric: Online Speech Bank, accessed November 15, 2021 <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/motherteresanationalprayerbreakfast.htm>.

4. “Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta . . .” American Rhetoric.

5. Kaitlyn Schiess said something similar to this on an episode of the *Holy Post* podcast.

6. Vermon Pierre, “Faithful Presence Needs Prophets,” in *Revisiting ‘Faithful Presence’: To Change the World Five Years Later*, ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2015), chap. “Faithful Presence Needs [. . .],” Kindle.

7. Vermon Pierre, “Faithful Presence Needs Prophets,” Kindle.

8. Deuteronomy 28.

9. Esther 4:14.

10. “Appalling Silence of the Good People,” Quote Investigator, published June 17, 2020, accessed November 20, 2021 <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/06/17/good/>. This quote is attributed to MLK’s “Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story” in 1958.

11. “Martin Luther King, Jr. I Have a Dream: delivered 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.,” American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches, accessed November 15, 2021 <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>.

12. See Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12.

13. Amos 1-2.

14. Gary Scott Smith, “Civil Religion in America,” ChristianityToday, published 2008, accessed November 20, 2021 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-99/civil-religion-in-america.html>. Originally published in *Christian History & Biography*, Issue 99: Faith & the American Presidency, 2008.

15. Kevin Giles, “Justifying Injustice with the Bible: Apartheid,” Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), published April 20, 2016, accessed November 20, 2021 <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/justifying-injustice-bible-apartheid>.

16. See Chapter 1, “Thou Shalt Not Go To Bed With Political Parties” in *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk* by Eugene Cho.

17. Luke 12:11-12 (ESV) And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

18. “Saint Mother Teresa . . .” American Rhetoric. See the footnotes.

19. Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:10, 28-29; Ephesians 4:11-12.

20. Russell D. Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015) chap. 2, Kindle.

21. John Campbell, “Why Cobalt Mining in the DRC Needs Urgent Attention,” Council on Foreign Relations, published October 29, 2020, accessed November 18, 2021 <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-cobalt-mining-drc-needs-urgent-attention>.

22. “Seek me and live” See Amos 5:4, 6 for the concept of repentance.

23. Nehemiah 9:26; Matthew 21:35; 22:6; 23:31, 37; Romans 11:3; Hebrews 11:37.

24. Skye Jethani said something similar to this on an episode of the *Holy Post* podcast.