

SERMON SERIES

# Sermon Series: The Prophets Speak Now

*A 6-week prophetic preaching series connecting Old Testament prophets -- Amos, Hosea, Micah, Joel, Jonah, Habakkuk -- to the urgent questions of the present moment*

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*Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.*



# Series Introduction and Preaching Philosophy

The Old Testament prophets were not fortune-tellers or crystal-ball mystics predicting future events for the curiosity of their audiences. They were covenant lawyers -- people who had deeply internalized the terms of Israel's relationship with God and who stood before the people, and before God, to announce what fidelity and infidelity to that covenant meant, and what the consequences of each would be. When Amos declared "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24), he was not offering a social policy recommendation. He was proclaiming the inexorable character of a holy God who had made a covenant with a people and would not tolerate a worship life disconnected from a justice life.

This series -- The Prophets Speak Now -- is built on the conviction that the prophetic word is not merely historical. The Spirit who inspired the prophets is the same Spirit who opens their words to every generation. The congregation that encounters Amos on economic exploitation, Micah on religious hypocrisy, Hosea on covenantal faithfulness, Joel on the outpouring of the Spirit, Jonah on the limits of parochial grace, and Habakkuk on faith in the dark will find that these ancient texts have an uncanny contemporaneity. They speak, in their specificity, more broadly and more urgently than any topical address on current events could.

## SERIES DESIGN NOTE

Each week pairs a specific prophetic text with a specific contemporary application. The sermons should be exegetically honest and culturally engaged without becoming primarily political. The goal is prophetic formation -- helping the congregation develop the capacity to hear the word of God and respond with both conviction and courage.

## Week 1: Amos -- When Religion Becomes Performance

### Text: Amos 5:18-24

Amos 5 contains one of the most devastating critiques of religious performance in the entire biblical canon. The people of Israel were maintaining a robust worship culture: sacrifices, offerings, assemblies, solemn convocations, songs, and harps. Their religious calendar was full. Their worship venues were active. And God, through Amos, said: "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" (Amos 5:21-22). The worship, however sincere in form, was being offered by a community whose social structures were grinding the poor to dust.

The theological claim of this text is one that every contemporary congregation needs to hear: God is not impressed by religious activity disconnected from covenantal life. The Sunday service does not purchase a blank check for Monday. The worship songs do not cover over the business practices, the relational patterns, the use of money and power, the treatment of employees and neighbors and the poor. God watches both, and he holds them together with an insistence that Western evangelical culture tends to separate.

### Sermon Outline

1. The Setup: Describe Israel's robust worship culture. They were religious. They were not irreverent. They were keeping the forms. The contemporary parallel: the congregation that is liturgically active, numerically growing, and spiritually impressive -- and whose members are living in ways that contradict the justice demands of the God they worship.

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2. The Indictment: God's first-person litany of rejection -- "I hate... I despise... I will not accept... I will not look upon." The severity of this language should land with full force. God is not gently suggesting an improvement. He is announcing a rejection.
3. The Demand: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Not a trickle. Not a seasonal stream. An ever-flowing, inexorable, unstoppable river of right relationships. This is not a program -- it is a character transformation.
4. The Application: Where in our individual and community life is the disconnect between worship and justice most visible? What would it look like for justice to "roll down" in our specific context?

### Preacher's Notes

This sermon will make some people uncomfortable, which is a sign that Amos is working. Do not soften it. But also do not moralize -- let the text do its own work. The preacher's job is to bring the congregation into the presence of the text, not to lecture them about their failures. The prophetic word is most effective when it creates the discomfort; the preacher does not need to add to it artificially.

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## Week 2: Hosea -- The God Who Keeps Pursuing

### Text: Hosea 11:1-11

Hosea 11 is among the most theologically dense and emotionally intense passages in the Hebrew Bible. God speaks not as sovereign judge but as heartbroken parent: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them" (Hosea 11:1-3). The image of God bending down to feed a child, leading them with cords of human kindness and bands of love, is the most tender portrait of divine parental love in the Old Testament.

The theological argument of this passage is that divine love is qualitatively different from human love in one specific way: it does not give up. Human love has limits -- the patience of even the most devoted parent, spouse, or friend can finally be exhausted by persistent rejection. God's love is not exhausted. "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (Hosea 11:8-9).

### Sermon Outline

1. The Story of a Love That Should Have Given Up: Walk through the Exodus-to-exile narrative from God's perspective. Every generation, the pattern repeats. Every generation, the love does not give up. This is not sentimentality -- it is a theological claim about the character of God.
2. The Anatomy of Divine Heartbreak: Hosea's portrait of God as parent is radical in its anthropomorphism. Engage it seriously. God is moved by Israel's rebellion. The image of a parent whose child has rejected them -- and who still teaches them to walk, still heals their wounds, still bends down to feed them -- is a window into the interior life of a God whose love is genuinely, passionately, inexhaustibly personal.

3. The Gospel Parallel: Matthew 2:15 explicitly quotes Hosea 11:1 as a text fulfilled in Jesus's return from Egypt. Jesus is the true Son who does not fail where Israel failed, who loves where Israel was loveless, who comes back when Israel did not come back. The Father's love that Hosea describes finds its definitive expression not in patient waiting but in sending.

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## Week 3: Micah -- What Does the Lord Require?

### Text: Micah 6:1-8

Micah 6:8 is one of the most quoted and least understood texts in the entire prophetic canon: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The verse is regularly cited as a comprehensive summary of prophetic ethics, but its context is crucial to understanding its force. It comes at the end of a mock trial (the "riv" pattern common in prophetic literature) in which God brings a covenant lawsuit against Israel. The mountains and hills are the jury. The charges are clear: after everything God has done (Exodus, wilderness wandering, conquest, settlement), Israel is still asking what God wants. The answer is delivered with prophetic exasperation: He has told you. It is not a new revelation. It is the whole of the covenant in three imperatives.

The three demands of Micah 6:8 are not synonyms -- they are distinct and mutually reinforcing. Mishpat (justice) is the rectification of disordered relationships -- the insistence that people receive what they are due, that systems function as they ought, that the vulnerable are protected. Hesed (lovingkindness, covenant loyalty, steadfast love) is the quality of relationship that goes beyond minimum compliance -- it is the disposition of the heart that delights in the other's good. And the walk with God is the spiritual posture from which both justice and hesed flow -- the ongoing, humble, dependent relationship with a God whose character defines what justice and love actually mean.

### Sermon Outline

1. The Courtroom Setup: Introduce the legal structure of the passage. God is making a case. The mountains listen. What follows is not a gentle invitation but a covenantal demand backed by the full weight of a relationship that God has maintained faithfully even when Israel has not.
2. The Three Demands -- Unpacked: Spend time on the Hebrew words. Mishpat is not merely charity -- it is structural. Hesed is not merely feeling -- it is covenantal. The walk with God is not merely piety -- it is the posture of humility that recognizes I am not the center of the universe.
3. What This Looks Like in Practice: Move from the three abstract demands to three concrete, specific applications in the congregation's actual life. Where does mishpat need to be done here? Where does hesed need to be extended? Where does the congregation need to walk more humbly?

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## Weeks 4-6: Joel, Jonah, Habakkuk -- Brief Outlines

### Week 4: Joel 2:28-32 -- In the Last Days

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Joel's promise of the Spirit poured out on all flesh -- sons and daughters, old and young, male and female, slave and free -- is the most democratizing pneumatological text in the Old Testament. Peter's use of it at Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21) establishes it as the New Testament's interpretive framework for the Spirit's post-resurrection activity. The sermon should move from the specific historical context of Joel's promise to its Pentecostal fulfillment to the congregation's own experience of the Spirit's indiscriminate outpouring. Key question: Are we making space for the Spirit to move in ways that cross the demographic and social lines we tend to maintain?

### **Week 5: Jonah 4:1-11 -- The Prophet Who Ran**

Jonah is the book that exposes the limits of the prophet's own grace. He preached to Nineveh, they repented, and God relented -- and Jonah was furious. His prayer in Jonah 4:2 is one of the most revealing confessions in Scripture: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." He ran from Nineveh not because he doubted God's grace but because he was afraid God would extend it to people Jonah didn't think deserved it. The sermon turns the mirror on every congregation: whose repentance would we find inconvenient or offensive? To whom do we carry the Gospel with reluctance because we'd prefer God kept his grace within certain boundaries?

### **Week 6: Habakkuk 3:17-19 -- When God Seems Silent**

Habakkuk's book is a sustained conversation with a God who seems not to be acting when he should be. The prophet complains; God responds; the prophet complains again; God responds again. The book ends not with theological resolution but with radical trust in the absence of evidence: "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation" (Hab 3:17-18). This is the prophetic climax: not the resolution of the problem, but the affirmation of the character of God in the face of the problem's persistence.

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## **Small Group Discussion Guide for the Series**

For each week of the series, the following questions are suitable for small group discussion in the days following the sermon:

1. What in this week's prophetic text most surprised, challenged, or convicted you? What did you expect the text to say that it did not say?
2. Where do you see the specific issue this prophet addresses showing up in our cultural moment? What would a contemporary Amos, Hosea, or Micah say to our society?
3. What would it cost you personally to take this prophet's word seriously in your own life? What specific change is the text calling for?
4. How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ address the specific problem the prophet identifies? Where is the good news in this difficult word?

*The prophets do not speak from a comfortable distance. They speak from within the community, to the community, about the community's actual condition. Preach them with that same interior authority -- not as a prosecuting attorney from the outside, but as a fellow member of the community who has heard the word and been undone by it, and cannot keep it to himself.*

# LiveWell by James Bell

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