

Have you ever wondered on whose side God is? It seems to me that just about every religious one believes that God is on his or her side. That is, because human beings are, by nature, selfish in their imagination. Who would think that God is on the other guy's side, but not on mine? Such thinking is not going to win any religious converts, it seems to me.

Sometimes, one might wonder, if God picks a certain sports team. One wonders about that, especially, when players huddle together to pray. I do not know what they are praying for, but I doubt that they are praying for the other team to win.

Does God take side with kings, or with the laymen? With the rich, or with the poor? With the powerful, or with the powerless? With the union, or with the management? With the Democrats, or with the Republicans? Will God stand with the oppressors, or with the oppressed? Will God be on the side of the Jews or the Arabs?

The answers to these questions not only reveal who God is, but also who we are. By revealing who we are, the answer also exposes the nature of our religion, and the driving force of certain beliefs that make up the religion. After all, most people have religion, because they have certain agendas that they want God to fulfill.

There are more questions about God than answers, actually. Is God on the humanity's side, regardless of what sins they committed? Is God too big to be concerned with the human trivialities, such as sin, injustice, or corruption? Or, is God too busy dealing with the pressing needs of the heavy-hitters to attend to the lesser needs of Joe Nobody? Or, is God only on the side of those who are just and pure in heart? Or, does God delight to bless one particular nation, neglecting the rest?

For the complacent and the desperate alike, God has to fit somewhere that makes sense in their lives. And God has to give

them the sense of justification to their action (God wills it!) and security to their lifestyle (God bless America!). It is very difficult for any people to imagine that God does not like them, and God will drive them out of their land, and put them to ruin in the near future. No, people would like to hear from God that God bless them with prosperity and peace.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what prophet Amos did *not* tell the citizens of the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos appeared near the end of the long and peaceful reign of king Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.). According to the introduction of my RSV Study Bible:

Israel attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity never again reached. The military security and economic affluence which characterized this age were taken by many Israelites as signs of the Lord's special favor towards them which they felt deserved because of their extravagant support of the official shrines.

Against this spirit of the prosperous time, Amos prophesied to them that God is angry with them, will not pass by them again, will lay them waste, send them away to exile, and rise against the house of Jeroboam with sword.

So the head priest of the time, Amaziah, told Amos basically to shut up and leave. Go back to where you came from, to the land of Judah, and prophesy there. "Never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." Simply put, anti-government rhetoric was *verboten*.

Whether it was Amos' time or our time, it seems remarkably similar. Any protest against the government is met with police tactic and pepper gas, because it disturbs order. The First Amendment protection is a very special thing, if you think about it. It is the protection given to those who have no power against those who wield power—the only way to hold those in power accountable. Amos did not have

that protection. But that did not shut him up. So, Amos answered Amaziah (7:14, 15):

"I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

Amos basically told Amaziah that he was nobody, but he was prophesying, because God told him to.

Another nobody did not fair too well, when he criticized a king. John the Baptist criticized Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodia. Herodia did not like John at all, and found the opportunity to get rid of the gadfly on the king's birthday. The king was in such a good mood that he declared in front of the many dignitaries that he would cede to his daughter one half of his kingdom, just for her asking. Upon receiving this news from her daughter, Herodia pounced upon the chance, and told her to ask for John's head.

To make the story short, the king had to keep his word in front of his guests, and John's head rolled.

Two kings versus two nobodies. There was nothing that could shield the nobodies from the mighty power of the kings. The word of the king was the law, and that law had the power to take the life of any nobody at whim. Given the situation, on whose side will God stand: of the king's interest, or of the individual's welfare?

The crucial ingredient of the Christian theology is this profound sense of justice in which God takes the enormous interest. God is extremely offended, when the powerful abuse and oppress the powerless. The prophetic writings of the Old Testaments are exceptionally keen on the subject of justice, and that seems to cast certain discomfort on preaching on the prophetic texts. The prophetic writings have the unavoidable political overtone, and mixing justice of God with the gospel message might bring two

unwanted consequences: loss of revenue and decrease in worship attendance.

In the time when churches are focusing on growth and expansion, politicizing the gospel is the last thing a pastor might want to entertain in the sermon. That is, however, one weakness of the organized religion: It must remain popular enough to attract attendance, but remain edgy enough to distinguish itself apart from the secular values. How much authentic can the church remain both to the gospel and justice of God, while staying financially healthy? Is the gospel of Jesus Christ truly apolitical? Is the prophetic tradition of the Old Testaments truly apolitical? Every church community must make a conscientious choice here.

Amos dumped his load of criticism on Israel, because of these concerns of God (2:6-8):

⁶ 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 shoes-- ⁷ they that 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 maiden, so that my holy name is profaned; ⁸ they lay themselves down beside every altar upon garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined.

When the good time rolls, people tend to focus only on the prosperity. God looks at the whole thing from a different angle, however, and focuses on those who have been excluded from that prosperity. To our God, the plight of the poor and the afflicted are of the utmost concern. This is consistent with the teachings of Jesus who told the parable of the Lost Sheep. The utmost concern of the shepherd shifts to the lost sheep, and 99 sheep are left on the hillside. God goes after the lost sheep.

Where there is prosperity, there is also corruption. Often those who refuse to bend and remain

righteous get in the way of the business, and they must be removed, in order to achieve the lucrative end. God was offended because the righteous were harmed for money. Prosperous Israel sold the poor for pittance. The afflicted were pushed out of the way, as if they were nothing more than an obstacle to be cleared. As it always has been, sexual indiscretion marked the behaviors of those who revel in the prosperous times. The possessions offered to the altar in pledge were used to entertain the worshippers themselves. Just as God focused on the plight of the poor and the afflicted, Jesus also focused upon the plight of the needy in his ministry, just as the prophets did.

If this is the kind of God whom we worship, praying for our peace and thanking for our prosperity are not enough. God wants our nation to care for those who have been excluded from participating in our peace and prosperity. That is the kind of God in whom we trust.

Our God is God of justice. God is keenly interested in the way those who have power and means conduct their businesses, and looks after those who are left behind in the wake of prosperity. Who would speak for those who fell through the cracks? Today, there are no longer those prophets to whom God speaks directly, as God did to Samuel, Elijah, and Amos.

Today, God chooses the nobodies, and bids them to tell the world what is wrong with it. Those who have the power and the means are so involved in maintaining their own interests, and they have their own agenda to attend: they are not capable of seeing the plight of the needy. God does not call them to prophesy for that precise reason.

God does not call heroes, the people of the substantial means, or the people of the exceptional pedigree to prophesy on God's behalf. God calls nobodies instead—the common folks—to be God's witnesses. That means God calls people like you and me.

Our God hid heavenly things "from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes (Mt. 11:25)," as Jesus prayed. Remember, when baby Jesus was born, who was invited to come and see him? Our God sent the angels to the shepherds of the field, but completely bypassed kings and high priests, and the rich and the powerful. Our God calls ordinary people, and depends on them.

Our nation is perhaps the richest of the world. But our nation does not have the health care coverage for those who cannot afford it. There are children who go to bed hungry in this nation. There are homeless people under the bridge and overpass. This persistent poverty in the nation *this prosperous* must mean something to God. What is God speaking to the ordinary citizens of this nation today?

If we think electing the politicians of our own political leaning is the way to correct the ills of this nation, we cannot be more dead wrong. They are

always busy listening to those with deep pockets, and for the next election cycle. The true transformation of this land must come from the transformation within the ordinary people's hearts.

It is the ordinary people to whom God will reveal God's plan, not to the heads of automakers, bankers, or pharmaceutical companies. It is Joe Nobody whom God calls today, as God did always. God calls today's local churches to the prophetic ministries, to uphold justice of God for those who have been marginalized and excluded in the land of peace and prosperity. That means you and me.

We are not the prophets, or prophets' descendants. We may be farmers, teachers, office workers, and professionals. But God surely called us to the prophetic ministries to be the witnesses to God's justice.