Sermon for July 15, 2012
Readings: Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14
Rev. Eldonna Hazen
“What do Amos’s words mean to us?”

Let us pray: May the words of our mouths and the meditation in our hearts always be acceptable to You, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

There are many people in history and today that I admire. I see people doing selfless work with the homeless, I see people serving not in one, but in many different charitable situations. I see people giving their heart and soul to make other people’s lives just a bit better. I stand in awe of the many people who work tirelessly, most not getting any pay, just giving of themselves. I stand in awe of their commitment and energy in painful and sometimes discouraging situations. However, there is always one person who continues to come to my mind, who I consider to be one of our more modern day Amos’s and his name is Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Romero studied in Rome, distanced himself from leftist radicals and their violence, and earned a reputation as a cautious conservative. The Salvadoran government was quite happy with his ordination as archbishop in 1977, whereas Marxist priests who ministered among the campesinos were dismayed. Then he did an about face.

A few weeks after his appointment as archbishop, Romero's close friend and Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande was slaughtered by machine-gun because of his ministry among the campesinos. The murder marked a decisive turning point. "When I looked at Rutilio lying there dead," said Romero, "I thought, 'If they have killed him for doing what he did, then I too have to walk the same path.'

Romero refused to meet with any government officials until they did an investigation. That never happened, and so in his three years as archbishop Romero never attended any state functions.

For the next three years he spoke forcibly against the atrocities of the Salvadoran government and its para-military guerillas — the terror, torture, death squads, rape, and human rights abuses. Every week in his sermons, listened to on the radio by peasants all over the country, Romero detailed the horrors in an understated but explicit manner. He wrote a letter to President Jimmy Carter: "You say that you are Christian. If you are really Christian, please stop sending military aid to the military here, because they use it only to kill my people." Carter ignored the request.

Romero became the most outspoken critic of the government and a passionate defender of the dispossessed. His first death threat came from none other than president Arturo Molina, who warned him that priestly garments were not bulletproof. In his very last sermon, on Sunday March 23, Romero explained his Amos-like vocation: “I have no ambition of power, and because of that I freely tell those in power what is good and what is bad, and I do the same with any political group — it is my duty.”

His sermon continued: "I want to make a special appeal to soldiers, national guardsmen, and policemen: each of you is one of us. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear a man telling you to kill, remember God’s words, ‘thou shalt not kill.’ No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God. In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you; in the name of God I command you to stop the repression!"

The next evening at about 6:30pm, a gunman shot Romero as he celebrated the Mass at a small chapel in the La Divina Providencia hospital where he lived. Later investigations established that the assassination was contracted by the government military.
This is exactly what we hear in the reading from Amos today. Archbishop Romero was a modern day Amos. Amos was called to challenge the people who were comfortable. The people of Israel, the rich, those who believed they were the “chosen people.” Life was comfortable and they believed they were being rewarded. What they forgot, was to look around them. They forgot to see those who were poor, those who didn’t have it so easy, and not because of their own doing, they just didn’t make the economic cut. And, to top it all off, not only did they ignore those around them, they believed the repressed were not the ‘chosen people’ and they DESERVED the meager life they were trying to live.

Amos, in our reading, begins: "This is what God showed me: God was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in God’s hand. And God said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the God, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

God showed Amos, using the plumb line, the wall of Israel was NOT straight. It had many places of weakness, the places of weakness being the way the state treated its inhabitants. All people were not honored, many were oppressed. Only the already wealthy were of value to the state. God asked Amos to point this out to the people of Israel, to give them the confidence to move forward, to find value and significance in their lives.

The government, of course, did not take kindly to these words being spoken to the people of Israel. In the text we hear Amaziah, one of King Jeroboam’s chaplains, try to persuade Amos to stop and take his act elsewhere, say Judah. “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

Amos’ response is not what Amaziah really wanted to hear. “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and God took me from following the flock, and God said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’” In other words, Amos refused to be bullied. Amos was clear in his mission: he was to speak the truth, no matter where those words landed. Some would land with the powerful and would more than likely put his well-being in jeopardy, some would land with the oppressed and would empower them and give them hope and still other words would land with those who agreed, but had either given up hope or needed to know they did not stand alone. Where do the words of Amos land in our hearts?

The words in today’s reading from Amos challenge us. There are so many times I want to do the right thing and I want to be able to stand up and speak truth, but many times I fall short of Amos and Archbishop Romero. Where do I find the strength? Where do I find the intestinal fortitude? How do I let my faith lead me?

Good questions, right? Now I bet you expect me to give you the answer! AND I wish I could give the answer. The rare times that I do find myself in a situation where I have the nervous, hesitant opportunity to speak, I try to do my best. I try to find strength to speak from a place of oppression that I can only imagine. I’ve not been there. The unfortunate part of this equation is: the people who can explain oppression the best are usually not welcomed to share their thoughts.

So, this is what gives me the strength to speak, when I do, which is not often enough. It’s because if those of us who are asked to speak, don’t speak, the voices of the oppressed will never be heard. If Amos had not spoken, if Archbishop Romero had not spoken, and the many other voices who speak were silenced, we would not have taken ONE step forward to stop oppression.

When the doors are opened for our voices to be heard, let us speak! May we find strength however and wherever we are able. Let us dig as deeply as necessary to speak as Amos did. God is STILL SPEAKING! Amen.