I’m not much of a prophet if prognostication is a prerequisite. I am a terrible predictor. Last Thursday I went to bed early, certain that the Rangers had game 6 in the bag. I actually believed that John Kerry was going to win the presidency.

But one prediction I nailed. I have been prophesying for five years that when more people understand the growing income gap, crowds will hit the streets.

Welcome to the Egyptian Spring, American style. OccupyWallStreet is how some have labeled the movement. The 99 percenters is an alternative. Tent cities have sprouted in downtowns across the land. Their inhabitants have cobbled together a makeshift democracy and debate society. They elect leaders, appoint spokespersons, refine their message. The message isn’t very refined – and probably can’t be – as it erupts from angst too broad for bumper stickers. Its central impulse is that something is gravely wrong with our economic system and our leaders aren’t doing the right things to fix it.

What’s curious is that the guitar strumming twenty somethings resemble – at least in their anger – the khaki clad middle agers who occupied the same parks only last spring. I speak, of course, of the Tea Party. Interestingly, the Tea Party is also possessed of the idea that something is gravely wrong with our economic system and our leaders aren’t doing the right things to fix it. Politics makes for strange bedfellows.

Here’s how Slate magazine contrasts the two movements. “Both are angry about what they see as economic unfairness – the Tea Party over deviations from free-market principle, the Occupiers over excessive adherence to it. Both are hostile toward society’s elite, though they define that elite differently. Both are frustrated with the American political system.”

Newsflash. This just in from HuffingtonPost.com:

“I’m waiting to see what the religious response will be to OccupyWallStreet, which is a true revolution of the people. It is a cry from people who have been abused far too long by those who hold economic and political power. It is a cry for justice and compassion. ... What will the established churches say in response? Most likely, not very much ... When ministers speak out against systemic sin, they risk losing financial support. Congregants who benefit most from the economic status quo may leave and seek safer ground.”

Now that’s a prediction worth some thought.

A church member dropped long ago. He is a good man, a decent man. He announced that he was leaving the congregation. His wife, too. He read somewhere that the PC (USA) was recommending divestment from several companies doing business with Israel. Turns out, he owns that stock. I promise you that the church they joined won’t mention divestment as a means to social justice.

Living in a declining empire,
   following Jesus in a society bearing its teeth and clinching its fists,
   practicing ministry with people enriched by but also diminished within an uneven economic system,
   what do we have to offer?

Much to the chagrin of the Left Behind crowd, Old Testament prophecy has a lot less to do with prediction than it does with proclamation. The prophets were inspired interpreters, keen observers. Prophets carried the word. They were word-bearers to God’s people when God’s people forget who and whose they were.

Amos certainly fit the bill. To a people content with summer fruit, he brought a message. People were hurting. While some grew fat, others grew gaunt. While some grew rich, more grew impatient. What was worse, God’s people grew complicit. Amidst the injustice of it all, despite the unfairness, God’s people did not speak. They did not act. In fact, they participated. In fact, they benefited. With deceit and false balances, they gamed the system. They couldn’t wait for Sabbath to end so that they could get back to business.
When I told my dad that I wanted to be a minister, he said, “It’ll ruin your weekends.”

Are you struck that words in their third millennia sound so contemporary? When Barth recommended a Bible in one hand and a newspaper for the other, I thought there would be more distance between them. No wonder my Old Testament professor said that, for the Hebrews, politics and religion were one and the same. Amos nails it. Amos describes our world, our context, us.

It seems almost sophomoric to observe something this obvious. Nonetheless, here it is. The market dynamics decried by the OccupyWallStreeters engulf us all. We are children of Wall Street. We benefit. Our pension fund depends on our investments. Our churches are funded by disciples who pledge based on their portfolios. Earnings on investments keep this seminary afloat. The congregation I serve could not do half what it does without its endowment. The same economic devices which have shown 9% of the workplace to the door and put millions of homeowners underwater, those same economic devices pay our salaries and secure our futures. That’s the simple truth.

Only it isn’t so simple. It is quite complex, practically and morally.

Are you uncomfortable yet? I am. The complexity of global capitalism and our interconnectedness with it can leave us paralyzed, stunned, slack jawed, silent.

Years ago somebody convinced me that Burger King contributes to deforestation in South America. Ranchers were clearing rain forests to create pastureland where Burger King’s cows grow fat for slaughter. So, I quit buying Whoppers. That is simple, easy, and obvious.

But what are we to do in a world gone famously flat, where Chinese workers make cheap products we actually need, and for a pitance; a world where 40 percent of American college graduates move back in with their parents; a world where the best solution for insolvent banks is apparently to open the people’s treasury to the very financiers who created this mess? Amos nails it. “Shhh. Hush. Now, listen up.”

Then, into a conscience as only silence can prepare one, God spoke a harsh word. Into that silence God threatened – more silence. God promised a famine, but not of bread and water. God warned of a famine of “hearing the words of the Lord.” It’s as if God said, “Since you will not listen to my words, I will no longer offer them” – the sacred silent treatment.

No words, no relationship.

Could anything be worse? We are people of the Word. You are here to learn and to interpret and finally to proclaim the word. Amidst the injustice and the unfairness and the overwhelming complexity of it all, can you imagine anything worse than the impoverished silence of speaking to global capitalism without having the words of the Lord?

It was no idle threat. Frustrated at the complicity of God’s people amidst economic unfairness, God surely was sorely tempted simply to shut up. Give them what they want. “Do what you damn well please,” as my mother used to threaten.

Yet – and here’s the good news – in the end, that isn’t who God is. God is WORD. God kept speaking. God gave words of hope and meaning to prophets and people alike, speaking always, calling passionately, pleading patiently. And when that didn’t do the trick God’s word took on flesh. God’s Word dwelt among us, teaching the curious and touching the untouchable, feeding the hungry and challenging the complacent.

“Look at that widow,” said the Word. “She lives on a fixed income, yet there she is, sharing it all.” It’s stewardship season. This text appears ever faithfully as an object lesson about proportionate giving and funding the institution but it rarely makes the preacher’s exegetical cut to observe Jesus’ obvious condemnation that the widow is so poor in the first place.

So finally – and you know what it means when the preacher says finally; the women can put their shoes back on. Finally, many of you are called to be preachers. Here you are learning to preach. Likely somebody has illustrated for you the importance of a sermon’s ending, how, if you’ve got it right, there will be some last illustration or final story that will hang in people’s minds, stick to people’s gut. Rhetoricians recommend saving the best point for the last. And, if a sermon is about a gracious God, the last and best point is always one of grace. And hope. Preachers preach Gospel, and at the end, Gospel is always good news.

So where’s the grace?

The hopeful lesson here is that God is finished with famines, finished with famines of the words of the Lord. God does not choose silence. The words of the Lord are still ringing true and sounding strong. The words of the Lord are decrying false weights and greedy measures. The words of the Lord condemn trampling on the needy and the bringing to ruin of the poor.

It just may be that the words of the Lord aren’t erupting from our sanctuaries but rather from our streets. That the church goes silent does not mean the Lord does.
Is it possible that we do not so much go to the protesters with the word of the Lord so much as to hear it already there?

This preaching task to which many of us are called is the spirited business of amplifying the words of the Lord above the cacophony of other words. But the Word, it does not belong to us. It is a gift for us. And when we muffle and mumble, the words of the Lord will find whispers and echoes in the most unexpected places.

Can we hear it? Will we amplify it?

So shhhh! Hush! Now, listen, you student preachers, for a word from the Lord offered not through a monk, not through a mystic, not through a preacher, but through a minstrel, a songwriter. It’s called “The Land of Plenty,” by Leonard Cohen.

Don’t really know who sent me
To raise my voice and say:
May the lights in The Land of Plenty
Shine on the truth some day.

For the millions in a prison,
That wealth has set apart –
For the Christ who has not risen,
From the caverns of the heart –

For the innermost decision,
That we cannot but obey -
For what’s left of our religion,
I lift my voice and pray:
May the lights in The Land of Plenty
Shine on the truth some day. 3

Let us pray.

Good and Gracious God, in baptism you claim us and name us as your own. Through the ups and downs, through market bulls and market bears, help us to hear and echo your words, that justice will be done, and love win. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

This is what the Lord God showed me – a basket of summer fruit.
   He said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’
   And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’
Then the Lord said to me,
   ‘The end has come upon my people Israel;
   I will never again pass them by.
   The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day,’
   says the Lord God;
   ‘the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place.
   Be silent!’

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
   and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, ‘When will the new moon be over
   so that we may sell grain;
and the Sabbath (over),
   so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah (ee'-fa) small and the shekel great,
   and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver
   and the needy for a pair of sandals,
   and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
   Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.
   Shall not the land tremble on this account,
   and everyone mourn who lives in it,
   and all of it rise like the Nile,
   and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?

On that day, says the Lord God,
   I will make the sun go down at noon,
   and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning,
   and all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on all loins,
   and baldness on every head;
I will make it like the mourning for an only son,
   and the end of it like a bitter day.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord God,
   when 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.
They shall wander from sea to sea,
   and from north to east;
   they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord,
   but they shall not find it.

[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.
Then he called his disciples and said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.’