

Prophets Series #5
Amos 1-4 (selections)

Pastor Chris Bellefeuille
July 21/22, 2007

Amos I

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake. And he said:

The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.

[Mt. Carmel is a mountain in the northernmost part of Israel, so the voice coming from Mt. Zion in Jerusalem in the south means that the LORD's roar can be heard through all the kingdom of Israel.]

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment because they carried into exile entire communities, to hand them over to Edom. So I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza, fire that shall devour its strongholds.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment because they delivered entire communities over to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of kinship. So I will send a fire on the wall of Tyre, fire that shall devour its strongholds.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity; he maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath forever. So I will send a fire on Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory. So I will kindle a fire against the wall of Rabbah, fire that shall devour its strongholds.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. So I will send a fire on Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet.

Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his stat-

utes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked. So I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.

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 — they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, [Samaria is the capital of Israel] who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, “Bring something to drink!” The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the LORD.

[Bethel and Gilgal are places of worship]

Come to Bethel — and transgress; to Gilgal — and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; bring a thank offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel! says the Lord GOD. I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.

Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel! For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth —the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!

I know that the seventh and final book in the Harry Potter series was released yesterday. We have our copy and I have no doubt that there are those in our congregation who have already read it straight through. I BEG of you, I IMPLORE you, not to give any of it away as two members of my family do not return home until Thursday and we agreed to read it together!! There. That's done.

Now I want to draw your attention to the recently released move: *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. This is number 5 in the popular series and centers around a prophecy. In this story, the very evil Lord Voldemort is trying to steal a prophecy from the Department of Mysteries... which is deep in the bowels of the Ministry of Magic building. Apparently, before Harry Potter was even born, there was a prophecy made that cast him as a mortal enemy of Lord Voldemort. Lord Voldemort does not know the entire content of the prophecy. But should the prophecy fall into his hands, Harry would be in even graver danger than he already is. And the future of the entire wizarding community rests on his young shoulders.

Prophecy has extraordinary power. Not because a prophecy itself can DO anything. It cannot cast a spell, it cannot itself alter the past or guarantee the future; it cannot even predict a particular outcome. All a prophecy does is tell a truth. What the hearers do with the truth has far greater impact on the future than the prophecy itself. The power rests in the truth and our response to it.

Amos is a truth-telling prophet in the finest tradition. He comes from rather modest beginnings. He is either a shepherd or the owner of a flock. But since his father is unnamed, tradition would hold that he does not come from a family of importance. He travels from his home in Judah to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, where he is active for a relatively short time sometime around 760 BCE, during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah in Judah. Both of these kings are enjoying long and relatively peaceful reigns. At the time Amos is active, there are no threats from Egypt or Assyria. Commerce is strong and their economies are stable and growing. So what would a prophet have to say in a time of peace and prosperity?

First, there is the emergence of a small very wealthy class whose prosperity is won at the cost of a large, increasingly impoverished working class. The middle class is relatively unheard of. Further more, Israel has grown arrogant about being God's chosen people. They rest on the idea of chosen-ness rather than let a relationship with God shape their lives in justice and righteousness.

So Amos is called and sent by God to speak a very hard and painful truth to the people of Israel. Amos is well chosen because he is the consummate preacher. He understands how to use rhythm and pacing, how to bring the people along in agreement with all he has to say before he drops his bomb. As you listened this morning, did you hear the rhythm as the indictments were read?

"For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...I will send a fire. For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...I will send a fire." One by one, Amos lists the kingdoms in the region that will suffer punishment for their many sins. Damascus for tyranny, Gaza for dragging conquered people into slavery, Tyre for the same, Edom for running the slave trade, Ammonites for rape and kidnapping, Moab for the desecration of burial grounds and sacred places. These kingdoms are trampling each other and their peoples. You can almost see the people of Israel glancing at their neighbors as they listen and nodding in approval at Amos's words. "Right on Amos, those are some really bad dudes over there. You tell it! Amen, brother."

But then things get a little more uncomfortable when Amos goes after Judah. Israel and Judah are not enemies. Judah is home to Jerusalem, the center of worship for the God of Israel. They are next door neighbors. But Israel listens to Amos's pronouncement that Judah is to be punished for unrepentant idolatry. The Lord says: "I will send a fire on Judah, and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem." Ouch, that is getting really close. And now that he has Israel's attention, Amos gets to the heart of his message.

You, Israel. Yes, I mean you. You who are so smug at being God's chosen people, you who were delivered out of slavery in Egypt, you whom God gave a land to call your own. You. You are driving people into poverty for the sake of a wealthy few. You are neglecting the widows, the orphans, the immigrants...the very people God specifically commanded you to protect and tend. You are going through pious motions of religion with pretty words and fragrant sacrifices but your lives do not reflect the lives of a chosen people of God. I love you but I cannot give you a status that your lives do not reflect. I love you but I cannot ignore your sin. Prepare to meet your God, O Israel.

Amos lived and worked nearly 2800 years ago. We can look back from our perspective in history and find ourselves nodding in agreement with all Amos has to say in these ancient scriptures about these ancient people. But the Bible is a living thing. The Spirit of God continues to breathe and speak through Scripture so that it is not just an accounting of history. The specifics may have changed but what would happen if we woke up one day and found Amos standing in front of the Washington Monument in front of a large and gathering crowd. What might we hear? This is just an excerpt from a piece by author and peace activist, Peter Ediger:

*Thus says the Lord, for three transgressions of **El Qaida**, and for four...they shall reap what they have sown...for killing innocents by the...thousands...training their young to hate.*

*For the three transgressions of **North Korea**, and for four...they shall reap what they sow...for starving their people as they fatten their military, threatening their neighbors with nuclear weapons...*

And rhythm beats on:

***Iraq** for grasping absolute power, for depriving their people of food and medicines...*

***Israel** for smashing houses they did not build, sending tanks to crush dissent...*

***Palestine** for failing to walk in nonviolence, for turning their children into terrorists...*

And we can glance at our neighbors as we listen and nod in approval at Amos's words. "Right on Amos, those are some really bad dudes over there. You tell it! Amen, brother."

And then Amos heaves a great sigh and says: "O people of America." At this point we will leave Mr. Ediger's writing, but you can imagine a hush falling over the crowd now. Suddenly the finger that has been pointing across the sea is pointing at us. What are our sins? Are we living lives of justice, non-violence and righteousness as people of God are called to live? This is not a question aimed at each of us as individuals. Amos speaks to people as community. How are we living? Does our worship have meaning or is it pretty piety for the sake of image or to assuage our guilt? Does our economy reflect care for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant as we have been called to by God as far back as we can trace our traditions? What would it feel like to hear Amos say the words, "Prepare to meet your God, O America?"

Amos says the Lord has begun to roar from Zion. The lion is a common image for the Lord. A lion does not typically roar before it hunts lest it warn away the prey. But Amos tells the people that the lion is roaring. There has been warning after warning, opportunity after opportunity to return to God and yet the Israelites do not do so. There will be consequences...they will reap what they sow. I encourage you to take time to read through Amos. It is not a very long book and Pastor Wayne and I cannot do it justice in just two sermons. The words are hard and discouraging and more frightening than an encounter in a book of wizarding fantasy. The book is a prophecy of indictment and it is not easy to read.

But it is important to remember that we are blessed to live as Easter people. We meet our God every day. We meet God in baptism, we meet God each week at the Lord's Table. We are blessed to have a community to support us as we meet God in worship, in the neighbor and daily in prayer. We are blessed to have a community with whom we can discover what it means to live as God desires and we are blessed to live in a country where we have the freedom to do our part to shape a society that cares for those who are oppressed, homeless, hungry or displaced.

It is tempting, I think, to dismiss Amos as musty and ancient. But prophesy speaks truth. Our hope lies in trusting in the leading of God to a faithful response.

Amen.