

Prophets Series #6
Amos 7:7-17, 8:1-12

Pastor Wayne Peterson
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Amos, Part 2

This is what the Lord GOD showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,

"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."

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

And Amaziah said to Amos, "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."

Then Amos answered Amaziah, "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.'"

"Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' Therefore thus says the LORD: Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land."

In this next section, Amos makes a play on words with the Hebrew word for "fruit", kayits, and the Hebrew word for "end", kets.

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 in 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, so that we may offer wheat for sale?"

We will make the ephah 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. 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.

In our reading from Amos today, when the LORD says to Amos that he is “setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel,” and that “the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,” we need to understand how the word “Israel” is being used here.

The country that had been known as Israel under the leadership of Saul, David, and Solomon had split after Solomon’s death in 928 B.C. into a Northern Kingdom still called Israel and a Southern Kingdom called Judah. Like many extended families, these two kingdoms sometimes battled each other and other times joined together to battle a common foe. When Israel split from Judah, it immediately had a major religious/political problem because Solomon’s temple was in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah. Jeroboam I, the first king of Israel, didn’t want his citizens having to leave the country to observe the Jewish festivals, so he established shrines at Bethel in the south and Dan in the north at which the people could worship. Bethel was the more important of the two, for Jeroboam I built a temple there with its own altar and priesthood.

This Northern Kingdom of Israel existed for just over 200 years before being destroyed by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C. But 30-40 years before that destruction, when Amos left his hometown of Tekoa and stood up to preach at the royal shrine in Bethel, the economy of Israel was booming. Worship attendance was up, the number of sacrifices on the altars was on the upswing.

Things were going great!

When we speak of Israel and Judah being separate countries, don’t get the impression they are far from each other. Bethel, on the south edge of Israel, was only 12 miles from Jerusalem on the north edge of Judah, and Amos’ village of Tekoa was just another 10 miles south of Jerusalem, so for Amos to get to Bethel would be like us going to St. Paul or the Mall of America. Amos made this journey because God had interrupted his life, as God has done to many people over the centuries. Amos’ message disrupted the complacent security of the upwardly mobile citizens of Bethel and confronted the piety of those devout who patted selves on back for their regular worship attendance.

Amos, like all prophets, is a physician of sorts. He diagnoses our spiritual and ethical health. And we, like the citizens of Bethel, tend to not like to go to doctors lest we be told something we don’t want to hear. We tend to ignore or downplay symptoms; we don’t analyze the spiritual health of ourselves and our society, perhaps because we fear the diagnosis. That’s one reason we may avoid studying the Bible. As Martin Luther put it, reading the Bible is like undergoing surgery. The Bible tells us there’s something inside us that will kill us, but it’s painful to have it removed.

Amos evokes the displeasure of Bethel's worshipers by speaking the truth. Pastor Chris reminded us last week that this is what prophecy is at its most fundamental level – speaking the truth. In chapter 5, a little bit before the passages we read this morning, Amos speaks the word of the LORD to the religiously devout citizens of Israel: “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (5:23-24) Evidently God is not much impressed by mere talk, by great music, by eloquent prayers. What God wants to see is the constant flow of justice and righteousness.

What do we mean by justice? In America, we think that justice occurs when the good are rewarded and the evil are punished. When someone who has committed murder receives a life sentence, we say, “justice has been done.” But in the Old Testament, justice means that the neediest in society are cared for – widows, children, the poor, aliens. A just society takes care of those who are needy and powerless. An unjust society does not. Another way to define Biblical justice is to say that “justice is the form love takes when there is more than one neighbor to be served.” Amos says, “Let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream!”

We might say, “Hey, we do good things now and then!” No doubt when Amos spoke, the fine citizens of Bethel said, “Oh, come back in the spring, during rainy season, when we have our spring harvest festival. We do good sometimes!” Like us: why, at Christmas and Thanksgiving we give to Interfaith Outreach or the World Hunger Appeal. ‘Tis the season for charity, you know. At other times of year we are busy with our daily routines and forget that the hungry are hungry in August. Children are children in April. Families get cold in February. In other words, we do good when we feel like it, a practice that John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, called “the doctrine of the devil”.

Amos was a shepherd, expert at nosing out watering holes. The landscape of Israel and Judah has countless ravines, but very few rivers. Most of the ravines are the beds of what is called a wadi. When heavy rains come, the wadi flows. But in the dryer seasons, the wadi bed is bone dry. Amos knew well what it meant to lead his herd toward a ravine, and peek over the edge to see -- is there any water? Is this a stream? Or another dry wadi?

Amos says, “Let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream” - not like a wadi! Let justice and righteousness be constant, like the air we breathe, not something we do once in awhile.

Now, I know what you are thinking – this whole business of doing good deeds. We Lutherans know we're saved by grace, right? We know that if God holds up a plumb line to us, we of course are not going to measure up because we are captive to sin. The good news is that God loves us because we are his, not because of what we do, so we can't earn God's love by trying to do justice. That's all true. But once that gospel truth takes root in our hearts, we begin looking for ways to return that love, ways to say “thanks” to God and ways to please God.

Too much of what passes for Christianity these days is a shallow exercise in feeling good ourselves, rather than trying to live in a God-pleasing way. The Christian faith is always competing with the gods of money, pleasure, success, and the next big scientific discovery. Those are the gods in which we are tempted to put our ultimate trust. Faith often becomes nothing more than something that gets tacked on to help us feel better in the midst of a crisis, or something by which we hope to convince God to give us our self-centered desires, or a sedative to allay our fear of death. But our everyday activities – our spending, dressing, driving, play and conversation – are all too often untouched by God.

Billy Sunday, a famous revival preacher in America a century ago, once said, “The best thing that could happen to a person would be to get saved at a revival meeting, and then walk out and get run over by a truck.” His understanding of Christianity was that the primary goal is to get to heaven when one dies, so the sooner one gets there, the better. To my mind, this is a sad distortion of the Christian faith. When you read the Gospels you find that Jesus continually invites people to join him in participating in what he calls the kingdom of God. The “kingdom of God” for Jesus does not equal “heaven” or “life after death”. The “kingdom of God” Jesus announces is a present reality that we can experience right now, and it is present whenever and wherever we love God with our whole being and love our neighbor as our self, wherever forgiveness is experienced and people are made whole. Jesus seemed uninterested in whether the people who followed him muttered the correct formulas, or got their doctrine straight, or if they felt “spiritual” or not. But he was keenly focused on how they treated others, how they spent their money, and their attitudes toward life. Amos’ call for justice is very similar to Jesus’ invitation to participate in the kingdom of God, for we cannot experience the fullness of the kingdom of God unless there is justice in our society.

There are many things we need to be saved *from*: we need to be saved from a pointless life, from our self-righteousness, from our cynicism, from our hypocrisy. But the salvation Jesus offers is not just being saved *from* sin and death. The salvation Jesus offers is equally about being saved *for* kingdom living. We are saved *for* the purpose of being the presence of Christ to our neighbor. Just as Amos barged into the temple at Bethel, he barges into our comfortable lives at St. Barnabas today and reminds us that we are called to let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream – in our individual lives and in our society. The message of Amos is as relevant in 2007 as it was in 750 B.C.

In a documentary on the life of Mother Teresa, there is a great moment when a wealthy woman from America finds Mother Teresa, whips out her checkbook, and says, “I want to write you a check to support your work.” Mother Teresa looks up, shakes her head and says “No money.”

“What?” “No money.” “You won’t take my money? I have a lot of money, this money can help you.” “No money.” “No money! Well then, what can I do?” Mother Teresa smiled that inimitable smile, took her by the hand, and said, “Come and see.” She led this woman deep into the barrios of Calcutta, searching until finally she came upon a small, grimy child. Mother Teresa said, “Take care of her.” And so the woman took a cloth, and bathed the little girl, took a spoon and fed her. Later she reported that her life was changed that day, for she learned the difference between charity and justice. Justice has something to do with knowing our neighbor in need and personally interacting with them.

Lest we think that justice is something that is only lacking far from suburban Minnesota, Mother Teresa has other advice for us. When Mother Teresa first came to the United States, she made a great speech in New York, in which she said, “You don’t have to go to Calcutta to share in my work. Calcutta is wherever you are. Wherever you are, there are people who hurt, who need love. Find them. Love them. For in loving them, you love Jesus.”

In the words of another Teresa, Teresa of Avila, from the 16th century: “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now.”

When we act as Christ to our neighbor, when we write letters to our legislators advocating that the needs of the poor and powerless be considered equally with the wants of the wealthy and powerful, when we are aware of our tendency as individuals and as a society to be self-centered and begin to make the effort to look at issues from a global perspective, then the river beds begin to fill with water, the current will quicken, and justice will flow. And God will smile.