

"LIVING THE DREAM?"  
Amos 5:18-24 Luke 4:16-21  
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York Center Church of the Brethren  
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*"I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."*

National Public Radio reported on December 9<sup>th</sup> about a rare Bible from the 1800's that is on display in Washington D.C. It was used by British missionaries to try to convert enslaved African people in the Caribbean colonies. What makes this particular Bible unique is that it was edited to eliminate texts that might encourage enslaved people to rebel or advocate for their own freedom. Any passages that could be used to reinforce slavery were, of course, maintained. Can you guess how much of the Bible was deleted after this crude effort at censorship? About 90% of the Old Testament is gone. And 50% of the New Testament was removed.

*"I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice."*

Yesterday in Washington D.C., Nathan Phillips, a Native American elder and veteran was harassed and mocked by a group of white boys from a private Catholic School in Kentucky. They surrounded him and chanted, "Build the wall."

*"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."*

The Southern Poverty Law Center is tracking 954 Hate Groups currently active in the United States. 34 have headquarters in Illinois including locations just a few miles from here in Carol Stream, Naperville, and Downers Grove. The Southern Poverty Law Center defines *Hate Groups as those groups who vilify others because of their race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity - prejudices that strike at the heart of our democratic values and fracture society along its most fragile fault lines.* ([splc.org](http://splc.org))

Are we living the dream yet?

I didn't think so.

Lest you think we are the first nation to elevate the hate and greed of a few to the detriment of the many, allow me to introduce the prophet Amos. Here is what Eugene Peterson has to say about biblical prophets, and in particular, Amos.

*The history, worldwide, of religion-fueled hate, killing, and oppression is staggering. The biblical prophets are on the front line of those doing something about it. They continue to be the most powerful and effective voices ever heard on this earth for keeping religion honest, humble, and compassionate. Prophets sniff out injustice, especially injustice that is dressed up in religious garb. Prophets see through hypocrisy, especially hypocrisy that assumes a religious pose. Prophets are not impressed by position or power or authority. They aren't taken in by numbers, size, or appearances of success.*

*Among these prophets, Amos towers as defender of the downtrodden poor and accuser of the powerful rich who use God's name to legitimize their sin.*

*A spiritual life that doesn't give a large place to the prophet-articulated justice will end up making us worse instead of better, separating us from God's ways instead of drawing us into them."*

When Amos heard the voice of God calling him out of his comfortable life to speak God's word to the people, it was the sound of a roaring lion. That should have been his first clue. No still, small voice for Amos. God was angry and the people were going to hear about it.

During the time of Amos, God's people, felt secure with their strategic defense system, they loved the perks that came with their affluence and wealth, they kept themselves busy with their religion- but they were indifferent to what was happening to those around them and to their relationship with God.

*"I hate your worship services! I despise your prayer meetings! I can't stomach your conferences! I will not accept your stewardship campaigns or your tithes and offerings. I will not listen to the noise of your self-serving songs! I cannot stand the smell of your potlucks!*

Pretty strong language, isn't it? The prophet was not tiptoeing around the issues. He had a message from God for the people and he was giving it- whether they wanted to hear it or not. God roars like a lion because the people, God's people, are not heartbroken over injustice. They are part of the problem because they mistreat the poor and the powerless.

As you can imagine, with a message like this, Amos was not a very popular guy. He was kicked out of the chapel in Bethel and banished from the nation of Israel. The people wanted to hear from God alright, but they wanted to hear God commending them for their good lives and their religious duty. What they heard instead was the truth; ferocious words of rage from the God whom they have tried to domesticate.

The people thought they were pretty religious, and they were. The problem is that they were not faithful. Their motives were all wrong. Their religion was their god.

They were more impressed with their religious activities than they were with the God they were supposed to be worshiping. God sent Amos to tell them that God has rejected every single aspect of their worship in the temple. God says, "I hate. I despise. I will not accept. I will not listen." Nothing about their worship is acceptable to God.

They think that when the Day of the Lord comes, when all are judged, their enemies will be destroyed and they will be declared holy. And they are pretty proud of themselves. But Amos says, "Boy, are you going to be surprised! It will be like escaping from a lion and running smack dab into a bear. It will be like fleeing into your home for safety, leaning against the wall to catch your breath, and getting bitten by a snake. Just when you think you are safe- you won't be."

So what does God want from these people? Amos says God wants what God has always wanted through history. It shouldn't come as a surprise to those who have been paying attention to the God they claim to worship. God wants justice and righteousness to roll through the land like a surging, churning, cleansing wall of water.

In order to wake them up Amos confronts them with the truth: they attend worship to enhance their own reputations and inflate their own self-importance. Instead of seeking God they only seek their own fulfillment. The soul has gone out of their worship. It is only empty ritual. Instead of communion with the Holy One it is only commotion in the holy place.

The kicker is that God isn't just angry about what happens on the Sabbath Day. God is angry about what they do and don't do the other six days of the week. Amos says, "You have turned justice into poison." They have oppressed the poor and the powerless with an unfair economic system. Their justice system is anything but and is not based on the truth but on the size of the bribe given to court officials. Their society is corrupt. The widows and the orphans are the victims. God's word has been forgotten, ignored, and trampled upon.

When Amos and the other biblical prophets cry out for justice they do not call the people to form a committee to write a query or a theological dissertation. They don't call for a debate on obscure philosophical points- instead, they grab us by the hand and call us to action. God demands action. The prophets lead us to the parts of the world where the poor live in squalor and hopelessness. They challenge us to look into the eyes of the lonely, the abandoned, the hungry, and the enslaved. And then to do something about it.

There are three dimensions to biblical justice. First is the call to **do** justice. Second, justice is the expected response of God's people to what God has done for them. Third, God's people are called to act as advocates for the powerless.

What do you think Amos would have to say to the church and to our nation today? What do you think he would say to the hate-mongers who use their religion as a weapon against others? What would he have to say to those who make decisions about who God loves and who God hates?

What would he have to say about the children separated from their parents at our southern border, sitting in cages? What would he say about budget cuts to domestic violence response programs, school lunches, and help for the mentally ill?

I think we know what he would say.

*"I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!"*

You know, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream isn't something he just made up. He heard it first from Jesus, that's how he knew it was true. *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God sent me to announce pardon to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free."* This was Jesus's mission statement and it couldn't be any clearer.

I consider the Reverend William Barber to be a modern- day prophet. A pastor from North Carolina, he has worked for the past few years to bring change to his state. Now he is one of the leaders of the New National Poor People's Campaign, taking up the work of Dr. King. His congregation in Goldsboro adopted this text from Luke as their mission statement. He writes, *"Jesus's language was justice language- good news for the poor, freedom for prisoners, healing for the sick and oppressed. But it was clear his ways were not the conventional political means. Liberation did not come to first century Palestine through the established political*

*parties of the Pharisees or the Sadducees. Instead, Luke's Gospel proclaimed that the freedom Jesus promised was already real in himself and, by the power of God's Spirit, in the acts of the apostles who followed Jesus. The church itself was called to be a liberation movement and a sign of what God's justice and freedom can mean for all people." (1)*

Drew Hart, in his book, TROUBLE I'VE SEEN: CHANGING THE WAY THE CHURCH VIEWS RACISM, holds the White Church accountable for its sins of the past and the present and the ways in which we have failed to be that liberation movement. He writes, "Americans in great numbers have passionately cried out, 'Lord, Lord' every Sunday.

*Likewise there is no question that America has a long, horrific, four-hundred-year history of white-dominated, racialized practices including slavery, white terrorism, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, humiliation, police brutality, mass incarceration, inequitable educational and economic opportunities, and much more. That Christian piety and oppression could so easily co-exist should be horrifying. It can happen, though, because the Jesus being referred to in America rarely had any resemblance to the subversive life embodied in the gospel narratives of Scripture. The god passed down from generation to generation in dominant culture legitimized our racialized hierarchy.*

*For too long, the church has gone about its business as though nothing were wrong. Meanwhile it has been a racialized organism, not only fractured relationally but actually practicing, perpetuating, or remaining silent to the racial oppression of others. And yet Jesus, in his birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection, has been the answer available to us all along." (3)*

Two groups of our church folks have spent the past three months studying the book, WHITE FRAGILITY: WHY IT'S SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM by Robin DiAngelo. For many of us, our discussion has been eye opening, and hopefully, life changing. We have had honest sharing and conversations about the reality of racism in ourselves as white people, in the church, and in our nation. And the questions we have asked, more than any other are these: "What are we going to do about it? How do we move forward?"

Racism in the United States is so pervasive that at times, it seems impossible to change. In those moments when I start to lose hope I turn to the giants of the Justice Movement, to people like John Lewis. As a young man he was a leader in the Civil Rights movement and he has the police record and the physical scars on his body to prove it. He was one of the courageous people who walked across that bridge in Selma right into the savage beatings from law enforcement officials. He is

now a United States Congressman from Georgia and continues to work for justice for all. In the foreword to his book, *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE*, Douglas Brinkley writes, *"As this book shows, Lewis did not emerge a beaten man. Quite the contrary: every punch, every kick, every jeer made him only more determined to love his fellow men and women. His life's goal remains dazzlingly audacious: no less than the creation of the "Beloved Community" of America, where God is made manifest, the exiled brought home."* (4)

Lewis acknowledges the racism and inequality in our society and he offers one clear reminder to us. *"Nothing can stop the power of a committed, determined people to make a difference in our society. Why? Because human beings are the most dynamic link to the divine on this planet."* (p. 6)

He calls for the building of the "Beloved Community" defined as a society based on simple justice that values the dignity and the worth of every human being.

He writes, *"The struggle for civil rights was more than a series of legal battles. It was a spiritual confrontation that tested the power of two ideas- one based on unity and the other based on division. Our faith rejected the notion that some people were inherently better than others because of skin color, hair, height, build, education, class, or religion, or any external attribute, and it embraced the equality and divinity of all humanity. When we cast off the false notions designed to limit us and twist our creative powers to serve the work of shame and fear,*

*we began to step into the majesty of our faith. When we rejected the idea that we were powerless, worthless, and incapable of counteracting the force of an unjust government, we could feel our faith building and our strength gaining.* (p. 26)

Mohandas Gandhi once said, *"The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems."*

For those whom God loves greatly- great things are expected. What we do in worship here on Sundays-- matters. What we do every other day of the week -- matters. It matters to God, it matters to us, and it matters to God's children in every nook and cranny of this world.

Our call to action comes from John Lewis. *"The most important lesson I have learned in the fifty years I have spent working toward the building of a better world is that the true work of social transformation starts within. It begins inside your own heart and mind, because the battleground of human transformation is really, more than any other thing, the struggle within the human consciousness to believe and accept what is true. Thus to truly revolutionize our society, we must*

*first revolutionize ourselves. We must be the change we seek if we are to effectively demand transformation from others."*

*"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain be made low, the rough places made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.*

May our life's goal, like John Lewis's, remain dazzlingly audacious: no less than the creation of the "Beloved Community" of America, where God is made manifest, where the exiled are brought home, and where everyone can live in peace and unity. May it be so with us. Amen.

*End Notes:*

- *THE THIRD RECONSTRUCTION: MORAL MONDAYS, FUSION POLITICS, AND THE RISE OF THE NEW JUSTICE MOVEMENT, The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. Beacon Press. 2016. P. 36.*
- *TROUBLE I'VE SEEN: CHANGING THE WAY THE CHURCH VIEWS RACISM, Drew I.G. Hart, Herald Press. 2016. Pp. 66-67.*
- *Hart, pp. 71- 73.*
- *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE, John Lewis, Hachette Books. 2012. P. xiv- xv.*