

"A FLOOD OF JUSTICE"

Amos 5:18-24

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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What do you think the prophet Amos would have to say to us, to our nation, in the days after this presidential election? I imagine it isn't what we would really want to hear.

Like most prophets Amos was just minding his own business, taking care of sheep, when he was called to speak God's word to God's people. (What is it about God and shepherds?) Amos should have known from the very beginning that this was going to be difficult job because when God called him the voice of God was like that of a lion roaring. No still, small voice for Amos. That voice withered pastures and dried up the mountain tops. God was angry and the people were going to hear about it!

The name "Amos" in Hebrew means "burden-bearer." The burden Amos carried was God's anger over the unfaithfulness and lack of justice of God's people.

Amos leaves his home in the southern nation of Judah and travels north to Israel. He arrives on the scene in Bethel not to comfort but to disturb the oppressive complacency of those who are at ease with their religion. At that time God's people felt secure with their status; they loved the perks that came with their affluence and wealth; they kept themselves busy with their religion- but they were indifferent to their own relationship with God and openly hostile to what was happening to those around them.

So, Amos shows up and doesn't mince words. "God says, I hate your worship services! I despise your zoom prayer meetings! I can't stand 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 stomach 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 are not heart-broken over injustice, in fact, they are the cause of it. They are a big 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.

Frederick Buechner gives us this colorful description. "*When the prophet Amos walked down the main drag, it was like a shoot-out in the Old West. Everybody ran for cover.*"

Amos was kicked out of the chapel in Bethel and banished from the nation of Israel. The people wanted to hear from God- but they only wanted to hear God commending them for their great faith and wonderful lives. What they received instead were ferocious words of wrath from the God whom they have tried to domesticate. God is angry because although the people were religious, they were not faithful. Their motives were all wrong. Their religion was their god. They were quite impressed with themselves and their religious activities and they expected God to be impressed too. But to their great surprise, 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 in their worship is acceptable to God- not their words, not their offerings, not their music, not their attitudes, not their actions.

They think that when the day of the Lord comes, when God judges all of the people, 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 to your home, 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 the same thing God has always wanted. 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 confronted them with the truth: they attend worship to enhance their own relationships and inflate their own self-importance. Instead of seeking God and the things of God they seek only their personal fulfillment. The soul has gone out of their worship. It is only an empty ritual. Instead of communion with the Holy One it is commotion in the holy place.

God's anger didn't end with what happened on the Sabbath day- it extended to what they did and didn't do every other day of the week. Amos says, "You are hypocrites. You have turned justice into poison." They have oppressed the poor and the powerless with an unfair economic system. Their judicial system is not based on truth but on the size of the bribe given to court officials. Their society is corrupt, and the widows and the orphans are swept aside. God's word has been ignored and forgotten.

When biblical prophets cry out for justice, they do not call the people to write out a query or squabble over a theological dissertation. They don't tell us to debate obscure philosophical points- instead they grab us by the hand and call us to action. They drag us to those parts of the world where the poor live, where the lonely are abandoned, where the

hungry starve to death. They force us to look into the eyes of those our society has abused and oppressed.

There are three dimensions to the biblical notion of justice. First, is the call to **do** justice. Justice is dynamic. It is action. For Amos it is to be like a churning, raging torrent that transforms everything in its path.

Second, justice is the expected response of God's people to what God has done for them. Those who receive justice and mercy should naturally want to extend those gifts to others.

The third dimension is the call to act as an advocate for the powerless. We aren't just supposed to hand someone on the street a blanket and say, "I sure hope you can stay warm tonight." We are supposed to change the conditions that force them to sleep on the streets.

What would Amos have to say to us and to those were on the ballot Tuesday?

What would he have to say about children torn away from their parents, sleeping in cages?

What would he have to say to those who want to take healthcare away from millions during a pandemic?

What would he say about a black woman shot in her bed or a black man suffocated by a police officer?

What would he say about those of us who refuse to speak out against racism?

What would he say to those who voted in support of white supremacy?

What would he say to those who cut the budgets of domestic violence shelters, mental health support, and pre-schools?

I think we know what he would say. It's the same thing Jesus said- "When you help the least of these you help me." What does God want from us? I think we know that too.

In his book, *HEALING THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY*, Parker Palmer wrote, " *The measure of national greatness is not only how successful the strong can be but how well we support the weak. When we forget that politics is about weaving a fabric of compassion and justice on which everyone can depend, the first to suffer are the most vulnerable among us- our children, our elders, our poor, our homeless, and our mentally ill brothers and sisters. As they suffer, so does the integrity of our democracy.*

Politics is not a game. It is the ancient and honorable human endeavor of creating a community in which the weak as well as the strong can flourish, where love and power can collaborate, and justice and mercy can have their day." (1)

Our recent election - who and what we voted for- says a lot about who we are as a people, as a nation. Jim Wallis reminds us, *"For Christians, the idea of the common good derives from Jesus's commandment to love our neighbor- including the 'least of these'- which is still the most transformative social ethic the world has ever seen, All our faith traditions agree that love of neighbor is required if we say we love God."* (2)

Priest and activist Daniel Berrigan once said, *"The prophet is one who speaks the truth to a culture of lies."* We are living in a culture of lies. We need the words of the prophet. And here comes Amos crashing into our complacency as defender of the downtrodden poor and accuser of the powerful rich who use God's name to legitimize their sin.

Back in 2006 an unlikely prophet spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington D.C. Bono is the one-named Irish lead singer of the hugely popular rock band, U2. He stood right there, in front of then- President George W. Bush and all of the movers, shakers, and power brokers in the nation's capital and he preached these words.

"I presume the reason for this gathering is that all of us here- Muslims, Jews, Christians- all are searching our souls for how better to serve our family, our community, our nation, our God."

He admitted that for most of his life he avoided religious people. He said, *"Maybe it had something to do with having a father who was Protestant and a mother who was Catholic in a country where the line between the two was, quite literally, a battle line."*

And then he said, *" Whatever thoughts you have about God, God has a special place for the poor. In fact, the poor are where God lives. God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them."*

It's not about charity, is it? It is about justice. We are good at charity. Americans, like the Irish are good at it. We like to give and we give a lot, even those who can't afford it. But justice is a higher standard. The poverty, AIDS epidemic, and constant violence makes a fool of our idea of justice; it makes a farce of our idea of equality, it mocks our pieties, it doubts our concern, it questions our commitment."

He reminded his esteemed audience that justice is not a Republican idea. It is not a Democratic idea. It is not even an American idea. Nor is it unique to one faith. He quoted Jesus in the New Testament, *"The second great commandment is you shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

He quoted the Koran: *"Righteousness is this: that one should... give away wealth out of love to near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and the beggars and for the emancipation of the captives."*

He quoted the Hebrew scriptures: *"Thus says the Lord: bring the homeless poor into the house: when you see the naked cover them, then your light will break out like the dawn and your recovery will speedily spring forth, then the Lord will be your guard."*

Bono stated his challenges to the politicians who had the power over budget cuts to social programs. He spoke of his concerns about violence and injustice to the president who had declared an unnecessary war on Iraq. He called to the leaders of the religious communities to stop patting themselves on the back and start working to alleviate poverty and injustice.

No one threw him out. But I am quite sure he stepped on many well-shod toes that morning. Like Amos, this rock star could have softened the sharp edges of his message a bit, but he didn't. That was the point, wasn't it? To poke a hole in our complacency and deflate our smug self-righteousness. The words of God are meant to hurt sometimes if that is what it takes to get us to move forward as peacemakers and justice creators in this world God so loves. No one who has read any part of the Bible should be surprised by these words- they are everywhere in the Old and New Testaments. They come from the mouths of the prophets and from Jesus himself.

This concern for justice and righteousness is not a luxury to be relished in good times. They are essential elements of a faithful life. They are requirements of faith for those who claim to love God.

What does God require from us? To **do** justice. To **love** kindness. To **walk** humbly with our God. For those whom God loves greatly, great things are expected. And that is all of us. What we do in worship matters. What we do every other day of the week matters. It matters to God and it matters to God's children in every nook and cranny of this world.

When God's people expend their imagination and their energy in advocacy for those with no voice;

When we work to remove the discrimination built into our economic, legal, political, and religious systems;

When we exhaust ourselves in finding new and more effective ways to take up the cause of the powerless- then and only then, will the extravagant justice of God begin to roll through this land and through our churches like Niagara Falls on steroids; then and only then will God's exuberant righteousness transform us with power like the white water rapids of the Colorado River.

I hope we can swim.

Amen.

END NOTES:

- HEALING THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY: THE COURAGE TO CREATE POLITICS WORTHY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT, Parker J. Palmer. Jossey-Bass. 2011. Pp. 2, 8.
- ON GOD'S SIDE, Jim Wallis, Brazos Press. 2013.