

Amos 5: 7-15; 23-24

Do you realize where you are? You're in a cosmos
star-flung with constellations by God,
A world God wakes up each morning
and puts to bed each night.
God dips water from the ocean
and gives the land a drink.
God, God-revealed, does all this.
And he can destroy it as easily as make it.
He can turn this vast wonder into total waste.

¹⁰⁻¹²People hate this kind of talk.
Raw truth is never popular.
But here it is, bluntly spoken:
Because you run roughshod over the poor
and take the bread right out of their mouths,
You're never going to move into
the luxury homes you have built.
You're never going to drink wine
from the expensive vineyards you've planted.
I know precisely the extent of your violations,
the enormity of your sins. Appalling!
You bully right-living people,
taking bribes right and left and kicking the poor when they're down.

¹³Justice is a lost cause. Evil is epidemic.
Decent people throw up their hands.
Protest and rebuke are useless,
a waste of breath.

¹⁴Seek good and not evil—
and live!
You talk about God, the God-of-the-Angel-Armies,
being your best friend.
Well, live like it,
and maybe it will happen.

¹⁵Hate evil and love good,
then work it out in the public square.
Maybe God will notice and be gracious.

(For God cries out and says to you)

Do you know what I want?
I want justice—oceans of it.
I want fairness—rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's all I want.

Let justice roll down like mighty waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos: Let Justice Roll Down

Thomas Jefferson has a memorial dedicated to him in Washington, D.C. For those of you who have been to the capitol, you may or may not have seen it, for it lies a little off the beaten path of the Washington Mall. The Capitol building, of course is high on that Eastern hill and the Lincoln Memorial is at the western end, with the Washington monument, the WWII, Korean and Vietnam memorials, the reflecting pool, and a few grassy spaces— all interspersed in between. Jefferson’s memorial is off to the south a ways – across a tidal basin – and out of the main traffic pattern. Most people will view it from afar rather than hike to its steps.

But if you did take the hike, past all the famous cherry trees, you would come to a structure with a dome much like the one at his Monticello home. And engraved on one of the walls over his left shoulder you would be able to read those familiar words:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

But there are other walls in Jefferson’s memorial – with other – equally impressive words engraved upon them. If you turn and look over Jefferson’s right shoulder you will find these words:

“God who gave us life, gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are a gift of God. Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever.”

Jefferson was speaking, ironically enough, about the practice of slavery – ironic because Jefferson was a slave holder. You see Jefferson knew that all men (and women) were created equal (he was confronted and convicted by the words he had written)

And

He knew that for one collection of people to assume that they were somehow superior to others
or for one collection of people to engage in acts of oppression and injustice
or for one collection of people to adopt an indifferent attitude toward the plight of the poor and dispossessed -

well, those were the kind of things that would stir and awaken a just and righteous God.

Jefferson knew about a man named Amos.

Amos was a prophet, the first of a couple of Old Testament prophets that you will meet this summer. I thought I might get Amos “out of the way” right up front, because Amos is not one of those warm fuzzy guys you’d enjoy meeting. Amos was no “good news” – “bad news” kind of guy - he was all “bad news” and “worst news” to all those people living in the northern Kingdom of Israel around the year 760 BCE.

He was not a clergyman, priest, preacher or scholar. He was a farmer, a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees – one who wore the clothes of a working man – one who had some dirt under his fingernails. As a dirt farmer, he was a peasant who lived a difficult life. His home was in the wilderness of Tekoa in the southern Kingdom of Judah – a rather bleak area of limestone hills located about 6 miles south of Jerusalem where one could scratch out a living trying to raise produce in these scruffy hills.

Seeking a market for his products, he ventured north to the Kingdom of Israel and traveled to the market places of Bethel, Gilgal, Samaria and Damascus. And what he found in the northern Kingdom troubled him greatly.

The King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel was Jeroboam II whose reign lasted nearly 40 years (786-746 BCE). It was a good time to be the King – a time of great prosperity and substantial security. During the early years of his reign, the great world power to the north, Assyria had defeated the previous world power, Syria, but it was a long, blood-letting and economically draining series of wars from which Assyria needed to rest and recover. So the neighboring countries – including Israel – were pretty much left alone.

As a result trade routes opened up. Market places were full. Less money had to be spent on armies and tribute and more could be spent on the “niceties” of life. City neighborhoods expanded and were quite a contrast from the rural villages that Amos knew. The upper class citizens owned both winter and summer homes and – we’re told - decorated them with ivory – creating –perhaps - some of the first McMansions. Money seemed to flow easily among enterprising, prospering people.

They were among some of the first people to foster the mistaken notion that signs of prosperity and wealth were to be taken as evidence of God’s favor and blessing.

But it ain’t necessarily so!

You see, not all was right with the picture. Under the influence of this culture of greed and plenty – Lenders charged exorbitant rates of interest on money that was loaned and people were sold into slavery when they could not repay. Merchants in order to make higher profits sold wheat mixed with chaff. Money changers had their thumbs on the scale. Community festivals degenerated into occasions for gluttony and drunkenness. It was that old, old story -the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

That’s when Amos wandered onto the scene. He saw the disparity between the haves and the have nots. He noted the superficiality of the religious power structure. He witnessed the desperation of the poor and the indifference of the well to do. And he was moved to speak.

Now the first parts of his speech were a hit – because he began by talking about the shortcomings of neighboring nations.

“Woe to you – you people of Gaza – because you carried into exile a whole people – God will send fire upon your walls.” (All right!)

Woe to you – you people of Edom – because you pursued your enemies with a sword and cast off all pity- God will send fire!

Woe to you – you people of Judah – because you have rejected the law of the Lord – God will send fire! “Just as we thought! – We always knew those Gazians, Edomites and Judeans were the scum of the earth. God’s gonna get you now! We always knew that God liked us best!

But then

Hear this word O Israel – you who sell righteousness for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes and who trample the poor into the dust of the earth.

“Hear this word – you cows of Bashan” – speaking to the rich women of the court – you women who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands: “Bring us a tall, cool drink!”

Hear this word O priests and scribes- I can’t stand your religious meetings. I’m fed up with your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music!

Now, as you might imagine, he was not a popular figure. His poll numbers dropped dramatically. He was an equal opportunity – offender. Amos was a prophet.

Contrary to a lot of popular thinking the prophets of God don’t predict the future. They are not soothsayers, palm readers or fortune tellers. Instead they announce outcomes.

They proclaim God’s judgment on what is evil,
they spell out the consequences of behavior,
and they hold out the hope of God’s deliverance.

The prophets speak God’s truth, even if it hurts, and prophets call for justice and righteousness, even when it goes unheeded. It should always be noted that this call for “justice” was not about “law and order” – not about criminal justice – it was a call for “distributive justice” – “economic justice” – a

call that reminded people that all folks are created equal in the sight of God and that God expects people to look out for one another – to do “the right thing” – to be righteous toward one another. It is the call of a compassionate God to be in caring and compassionate relationships with one another.

People who have it made in this world hate this kind of talk – they think they’ve made it on their own – pulled themselves up by their bootstraps – they expect others to do the same. Poor people are poor because they brought it on themselves – they must deserve what they got. So the raw truth that Amos speaks is never popular among the elite, the powerful, the comfortable – but here is Amos – bluntly speaking.

To make matters worse, Amos was a foreigner. He was from Judah – a different country – and he had the nerve to be preaching to Israel. It would be a like a shopkeeper from Mexico coming across the border and speaking out against the treatment migrant farm workers were receiving. Or like a wheat farmer from Canada coming down to the United States preaching about the injustice of our health care system. Just who do they think they are – go back to Canada – go back to Mexico where you belong. Quit making trouble.

Amos was one of those “outside agitators”. Jeroboam and his court were not pleased. The powers that be were not pleased. He was an embarrassment to the elite and the powerful. He was not afraid to speak truth to power even when threatened by those who could do him get bodily harm!

We don’t know what happened to Amos – whether he was run out of town – tossed into prison – stoned to death for treason – or simply went back to his home in Judah having said what needed to be said.

What ever happed, we do know that his appraisal of of Jeroboam’s Israel was right on.

A kingdom – a culture and a people that placed their priorities in accumulation, materialism and greed – A kingdom, a culture and a people that was indifferent to the needs of the poor and the needy –

That kingdom – that culture- those people who thought that their prosperity was God’s Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval – Well, within a generation that kingdom – that culture – those people would be overrun by the armies of Sargon the Assyrian – and they would never again be a nation.

So Amos was right – right about the consequences of injustice and selfishness in ancient Israel.

As Thomas Jefferson reflected on the injustice of slavery and how it would one day tear this nation apart in a bloody civil war he knew that the words of Amos were right and spoke the truth of how distributive justice, political freedom, and righteous discernment were not special rights parceled out to a few folks, but gifts of God- tools that were meant to be used for the benefit of all people. Not building blocks for personal success or private gain – but responsibilities that communities would need to use to care for even the least of its members.

What would Amos have to say if he popped in on us today? This stranger, this foreigner who suddenly makes the news by speaking out and making trouble.

Yesterday the crown on the Statue of Liberty was once again opened to the public. Miss Liberty is, of course, one of those dramatic symbols of Freedom and Justice. I think that Amos would remind us all once again of the words that are engraved on a tablet within the pedestal on which the statue stands:

Give me your strong, your rich, your best minds and intellects – you know the ones who can pay their own way, the ones eager to climb the corporate ladder, who won’t ask too many questions and will want to be just like us.

Whoops! That’s not how it goes, is it?

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

Amos, of course, holds our feet to the fire of Miss Liberty's torch. Do we really mean what we say we mean by the words written on that tablet – or do we just “kinda - sort of” mean it.

Do we really want to deal with the tired – the poor and the huddled masses? Masses sound messy. The Poor – well they exhaust us – so many needs!

Do the homeless and the wretched refuse have a high priority - any priority - in our plans – or are they just a figure of speech?

As we allocate resources, time and energy - as we spend our money, create budgets - both personal and governmental – are we faithful to that call to distributive justice – or content to let those who are struggling – for whatever reason – do the best that they can.

Do we really want justice – distributive justice - to roll down – or just sort of trickle down?

One of the important things that we need to remember is that in spite of Amos's dire predictions of doom – his purpose was not to terrify the people or to take delight in scolding them. He was not ready to gloat when they fell into recession or suffer the consequences of their behavior. He spoke passionately – he spoke hopefully – he spoke fervently - he appealed to their greater instincts - that they might recognize that they had gotten off track and needed to refocus and reform themselves and the way that they treated even the least of those among them . He urged them to begin to live like the people God created them to be.

The words of Amos and Jefferson and Miss Liberty remind us and invite us to do the same as we take seriously our responsibility not only as citizens of this country, not only as citizens of a world wide community, but most importantly as citizens in the Kingdom of God.

Let justice roll down like mighty waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Let us pray:

Holy God, there are times in which we need your comfort and some gathered here today are in desperate need of your comfort. There are times in which we need your prodding and your challenge, to lift us out of ourselves, to throw us into the midst of a needy and uncertain world, to be your ambassadors. Give to us both comfort and challenge today so that we can be your faithful witnesses promoting and working for justice and righteousness in all the places we inhabit. Guide us to this end. It is in Christ's name we pray. Amen.