



“Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters”
Scripture – Amos 4 and 5, Luke 12:13-21
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 22, 2019

How many of you came to church today in hopes of hearing an uplifting message? (Raise hands). How many of you came to church today to be shamed and insulted? Oh dear. I’m sorry to inform you that you came on the wrong Sunday! Because today our focus is the prophet Amos and he may be the most repugnant of all the prophets.

If your image of an Old Testament prophet is an oversized, muscular man with fiery eyes, who roars like a lion and fails to censor his thoughts before they tumble out of his mouth, you have an accurate picture of Amos. His prophecies were acerbic tongue lashings of the wealthy.

To set the scene, we first travel back to 925 BCE, when King Solomon died. For about 70 years, the twelve tribes of the Hebrew people had lived together as one large, united kingdom. However, after Solomon died, a revolt divided the kingdom in two – north and south.

Amos lived in the Southern Kingdom, not far from Bethlehem, but he felt called by God to travel to the Northern Kingdom and give them a piece of God’s mind. And it was not God’s genteel piece. Amos delivered God’s thoughts about the people when God must have been having a Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day!

To better understand the blunt and biting message Amos delivered, it helps to know something about the cows of Bashan. Bashan was a fertile land east of the Jordan River that produced the largest cattle in the region. Amos used these hefty cows as a metaphor to describe the wealthy women in the Northern Kingdom.

In our day, thin people are generally considered very attractive. Most models for women’s clothing appear to be six feet tall and weigh about 88 pounds! But it was the reverse in the ancient world. In the ancient world, the majority of people were thin because they did not have enough to eat. Obesity was a sign of wealth. Plumpness heralded prosperity.

So, Amos – as a mouthpiece of God – said to the wealthy women, “You cows of Bashan who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring me something to drink!’ ...the time is coming when they shall take you away with fishhooks.”

So that you do not miss the lovely imagery, Amos is saying that they will be dragged into captivity by means of large hooks through their noses. Later drawings by the Assyrians, who conquered the people of the Northern Kingdom, showed the people being led away by the hooks in their noses. It gives me the shivers.

There is more. Amos declares, “You who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord?” The people thought they wanted the day of the Lord because they thought this would be the moment in history when God would destroy their enemies and their prosperity would soar even further. Amos had bad news for them. For them, the day of the Lord would be darkness, not light. It would be as if they fled from a lion and ran headlong into a bear; or went into their house and rested their hand on the wall and were bitten by a snake.

There’s more. Apparently the people protest, saying, “But we worship God so earnestly! We make sacrifices, we sing, we pray, we burn incense!” Amos excoriates them for thinking that that their worship would excuse them from not treating others justly. Because of the way they treat the poor, their worship has become an affront to God.

Why such a harsh prophecy? It is elementary. They ignored people who were poor and in need, they used their wealth and power to take advantage of the weak, and they were concerned only for themselves. But from the earliest history, God made it clear that those WITH are to care for those who are WITHOUT.

Our passage ends with the words made famous by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” It’s not a complicated command. God wants us to do what is right and fair and just.

God called the prophets to be the jolt people needed to dislodge them from their complacency and their self-centered ways, and to direct their focus instead on the common good. Whether or not the prophets understood the interconnectedness of life, they could envision on some level that when the vulnerable are neglected, the entire society will eventually crumble.

Harsh prophecies like this one from Amos prompt many Christians to flee the Old Testament for the gospels and to seek refuge in Jesus – especially his focus of love. However, as our parable from the Gospel of Luke points out, Jesus could also deliver a message with a bite.

He tells a parable about a rich man who had a terrible dilemma on his hands. He had a bumper crop that eclipsed anything he had ever had. His crops were so bounteous he could not store it all in his barns. So, he pondered his dilemma. He thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said to himself, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. Then, once my super-sized barns are built and my grain is stored, I’ll kick back and live a life of pleasure.’ However, before he can instigate his plan, God says, “You fool! You’re not going to kick back; you’re going to kick the bucket. And your barn full of goods – whose will it be?”

To be clear, Jesus did not tell this parable simply to pummel people who are prosperous. But he does warn us of what wealth can do to our soul. This man was “drowning in self-absorption.”¹ Did you notice how many times the wealthy man used first person pronouns? *I* have no place to store *MY* crops. *I* will pull down *MY* barns and build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *MY* grain and *MY* goods.” And did you notice who he was talking to about his dilemma? Himself. His selfish nature had driven everyone else away.

Greed distorts our perspective. The rich farmer believed that his abundance was entirely the result of his own efforts. It never crossed his mind to express thanks to God for the soil and the weather patterns that produced the extraordinary crop. It never crossed his mind to thank the laborers who helped plant and harvest the record breaking yield.

If you peruse the gospels, you find that Jesus talks more about wealth and possession than he does prayer. This is not because Jesus believes earning money and owning nice things are sinful and we are expected to take a vow of poverty. It’s because he knows that wealth and possessions have a shrewd and subtle way of blurring our vision.

Greed is often easy to identify in others, but it can slip under the radar and lodge in our own hearts without us noticing it. Being generous and giving away a portion of our wealth to people who are poor or suffer misfortune is the chief antidote to greed and selfishness.

Fifteen years after the death of her mother, Amanda – not her real name – cannot shake from her mind an image of her mother on her death bed. Her mother knew she was down to her final days, but less than 48 hours before she died, she was sitting up in bed with the phone in one hand and her credit card in the other, ordering clothing and more unnecessary stuff for the house.

Amanda tries to brush it off with a joke. She laughs and says, “My mom, supporting the economy right up to the end!” Only it is tragic rather than humorous.

How different it would be for Amanda if her lasting image of her mother was her mom sitting up in bed with the phone in one hand and her credit card in the other calling feeding and housing ministries, and after-school tutoring programs and her church, making generous donations.

Prophetic Spirituality reveals the necessity of developing a generous spirit. There is an enormous difference in your personal integrity, in your self-image, and in your relationship with God, when you possess a generous spirit. A generous spirit produces a sense of serenity and a sense of harmony with God. It makes you feel as if your life is on the right track and what you are doing has genuine significance.

Later this week you will receive a letter from the church. Please don’t toss it in your recycling bin and please don’t push it into the “I’ll look at that later” stack. How many have an “I’ll look at that later stack?” (Raise your hands). Please do not put this week’s letter from the church in *that* stack. Instead, think about the lift it will bring your soul to be generous and think about the many people’s lives our church will be able to touch with God’s love as a result of our combined gifts.

Think about the many children in our congregation and how we teach them about compassion and forgiveness and the kind of person God wants them to become. Think about the youth who are at a critical stage of development who might drift down the wrong path if it were not for their involvement in our youth ministry. Think about the infants we baptize and the young couples we marry and the ill we visit and those struggling with life we counsel and those who walk into worship wrapped in the barbed wire of despair but walk out with their hope renewed.

When you pull out that blank pledge card that is urging you to make a significant gift, think about how we will be able to feed people who are hungry, house people who are homeless, provide space for an after school tutoring program and a summer camp for low income children. Think about our vibrant relationships with people in Guatemala and Congo. Think about the hundreds of people who now have clean drinking water because of our gifts.

I love our church family because we provide numerous quality ministries for our congregation, and we also reach into our community and the wider world to lift people who are in crisis. The prophet Amos warned the people of the Northern Kingdom of their demise and said it was rooted in their neglect of the poor and their injustice toward the weak. Had the ruling class remained fat and happy, and if their prosperous lives had continued we never would have heard of Amos. But the fact that within a decade of his prophecy the Northern Kingdom was no more, verified that Amos was a genuine prophet with a word that every generation ought to heed.

The parable of Jesus is an echo of Amos because it also warns of greed and focuses on one’s demise. Perhaps it is because I did a memorial service yesterday for one of our long time members who lived a beautiful life we

could all celebrate; but it seems to me that Jesus talks about this wealthy man's death to prompt us – perhaps to *prod* us – to consider how we will be remembered.

What will people say about us at our memorial service? Will they say, “Well, he owned several dazzling cars?” Or, will they say, “He tutored a young boy whose father was in prison?” Will they say, “She was always on the tennis court?” Or, will they say, “She did so much for people who were homeless?” When our time is up, will they be able to share stories about our generosity?

A beautiful life that deserves celebrating does not result from accumulating more, but from sharing with all our heart.

NOTES

1. Debie Thomas, “Rich Toward God,” July 28, 2019.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Every good and perfect gift comes from you, O God of Life. In this hour we are mindful of the blessings in our lives and of the many ways we experience your grace in moments both extraordinary and ordinary. We give thanks for loved ones — for circles of support and the fellowship of friends. We give thanks for opportunities to gather in communities that embody your care. We give thanks, O God, for your love that binds all things together.

As we pause to remember the blessings we enjoy, we are mindful — too — of all that is not as it should be:

We pray for those we hold dear — our family, our friends, our community of faith. We seek your peace for those who mourn, your comfort for those who are ill, your hope for those who despair. We pray for our neighbors throughout the world, many of whom suffer from devastating disasters or entrenched conflict: We lift before you those suffering from a lack of resources or a poverty of opportunity; those living in neglected neighborhoods or communities plagued by violence; those who feel discarded or devalued ... God — There is so much that tears away at your vision of *Shalom*. Pour out your Spirit upon this hurting world, until all creation experiences your wholeness.

Generous God — You give us imagination and intellect, hands to serve and hearts to love. Help us use these gifts to glorify you. As we long for the day when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, we pray that you would draw us into your healing work. When we see need, give us generous spirits. When we see injustice, give us courage to advocate for the ‘least of these.’ When we see suffering, give us hearts of compassion. When we see despair, give us the faith to proclaim hope. Inspire us, empower us, send us — we pray — to proclaim the good news, until your kingdom comes.

This we pray in the name of your Son, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.