

“Minor Prophets, Major Concerns: The Justice of God”
August 21, 2022

Amos 5:18-24

Luke 18:1-8

“Alas for you...”

If you’re not feeling at least a little uncomfortable right now, then you probably weren’t listening too closely when I read this morning’s lesson from Amos.

Did you hear this? “I hate your festivals.”

Or this? “Take away from me the noise of your songs.”

Back in college I learned a song that paraphrased the words of Amos, in which God says: “I hate and despise all your potlucks, your solemn assemblies in church.” Sometime later I was sitting in a Bible study of Amos and I shared that with the group. The minister leading the study responded by saying: “That’s harsh.”

It is. Amos is like that—speaking to us where we live, and leaving us uncomfortable with what we hear.

“Alas for you...”

Those three words seem to summarize the message of the prophet Amos as much as any.

Remember that a prophet doesn’t so much *foretell* the future as the prophet *tells forth* the word of God. And from the opening verses of this book, Amos speaks for a God who comes roaring like a lion, striking fear in the hearts of all who hear.

He is the prophet of God’s wrath. In the first two chapters we hear again and again the same refrain against all the nations, both the Gentiles as well as God’s chosen Israel: “For crime upon crime, I shall grant them no reprieve.” Judgment and punishment are coming, Amos warns. Indeed, they are already upon the people.

We would flee from such a God, but Amos tells us that would be like running from a lion only to be met by a bear.

“Alas for you...”

I’ll come back to those words of woe.

But first I want to share with you how this book ends.

At the last minute, in the final verses of the final chapter, the God who cries “Woe,” the God who roars and threatens, speaks a word of hope:

The time is surely coming,
 when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps,
 and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
 the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
 and all the hills shall flow with it.
 I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
 and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
 they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
 and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
 I will plant them upon their land,
 and they shall never again be plucked up
 out of the land that I have given them.”

This, ultimately, is what God desires: Abundance. Restoration.

This, in the end, is what God will bring about: Abundance. Restoration.

This, in the end, is the justice of God: Abundance. Restoration.

Let’s let that sink into our weary, worried souls for just a minute.

Imagine the cities rebuilt. Imagine the hills and mountains flowing with all good things.

God’s will is that you would know abundance.

God’s will is that your ruined places would be rebuilt.

And that is not just God’s desire for you alone, but for all people, all creation.

But how do we get there? How do we move from trembling before the roaring lion to feasting in abundance in the rebuilt cities?

The path is shown in the words we heard this morning—even if they don’t seem very promising at first.

Amos spoke to a nation at the height of its power. The rich were very well-off. The might of the military was obvious and well-known. The cities were elegant; the second homes were extravagant.

At the same time, there was an underside to all of this—there always is. There seems to have been a widespread addiction problem. Violence was evident. Commerce was corrupt and fraudulent. The poor were denied justice.

Alexis de Tocqueville thought faith exerted a crucial moderating force in a democracy. He argued that though “the law permits the American people to do everything, religion prevents them from conceiving everything and forbids them to dare everything.”

Maybe. But in our time, we see “religious” people conceiving and daring just about everything: supporting the aberration called “White Christian Nationalism,” seeking to restrict the basic rights of people—to marry the one they love, to care for their bodies and their health, and promoting all manner of violence.

Amos spoke to a people who had strayed so far from God’s ways they, too, were conceiving and daring everything.

Religion doesn’t always do what it should.

When Amos spoke, then, he condemned the worship of the people that was simply noise; he opposed the violence and the corruption, the excesses of the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

We need to remember, however, that Amos was not a scold, he was a prophet. His work was not to chastise or criticize, but to call the people to turn in a new direction, to change their minds and their hearts and their actions, to do something different, to be better people.

The religious word for this is “repentance.” It is an offer of new life.

This life comes to us as we live in relation to others. We might not be able to get along with everyone. But we can seek right relationship with our neighbors; we can work to establish social structures that help support strong, independent lives rather than make more broken people.

This is what Amos is getting at with his invitation to “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

I say “invitation” intentionally.

For Amos, justice and righteousness were not conditions that the people were called to create. They were not told to work for justice. They were not encouraged to acts of righteousness. Justice and righteousness, Amos suggests, are always present in the world as the activity of God. Our task, our *invitation*, is to simply get out of the way and let the justice of God roll down like waters.

This is the reason for the complaint about worship. Today those words are often pitted against an imperative to work for justice—as though worship is of no value and justice is all that is important.

Amos was not opposed to right worship—only the worship that got in the way of right relationships between people. Worship should lead us to joining with God in what God is already doing in the world: restoring and rebuilding, bringing the abundance for all that we see in the vision found in the closing words of this book.

If we listen to Amos, we can also hear Jesus as he encourages us to pray always and not to lose heart as we participate in what God is doing.

He told of a judge—then as now, a symbol of power—and of a widow—someone at the opposite end of the power spectrum. The New Testament scholar and preacher, Fred Craddock, said that widows in the ancient world were “extremely vulnerable—they couldn’t inherit their husband’s property, there was no organized social welfare program, and for the most part no opportunity

for independent employment for them.” They often found themselves dependent on judges for protection and fairness.

This is what Amos means by justice: fairness, right relationships. But it does not always come readily.

It is this widow’s misfortune to come up against a judge with no respect for God or human beings. This man is her only hope for justice. And justice is denied.

While this might have been the end of the story for some people, it isn’t for this widow. She doesn’t give up. She continues to plead her case. Again and again, she comes before the judge.

Thinking about this, the judge realizes that this woman is going to wear him out. Using language from boxing, he says literally, “I will grant her justice so that she won’t come and hit me under the eye.”

It is best if he simply gets out of the way as justice rolls down. If even for the wrong reason, he does what is right.

If we listen carefully, “Alas for you,” becomes an invitation to turn in a new direction.

God’s justice is rolling down like water into our world. Let us get in that stream and go with that flow.