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Amos 5:11-15, 21-24; 9:11-15
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Amos – Let Justice Roll!

I have heard and preached a lot of sermons in my life. And, to tell you the truth, I can count on one hand the number of sermons I heard that were based on the book of Amos.

And, believe it or not, this is the first time I've ever preached on Amos.

Why? Well, I don't know if I've ever actually spent time preaching on any of the Minor Prophets.

And ... Amos is tough. Amos is blunt. Amos says things that no one wished to hear 2800 years ago, much less today.

That judgment may be harsh, but I do not think it is altogether unfair.

Amos was called to the task of prophecy by God around 760 B.C.E.

What do we know about Amos? Well, he was a man without credentials, a man with no professional pedigree.

No diplomas were hanging on his office walls.

No degrees came after his name.

No biography was written about his life or documentary made about his ministry.

He knew none of the right people. Nor was he a man of experience.

He didn't even go to seminary, for goodness sake!

He was not a prophet, so he claimed, and he had not grown up in a prophets' home.

He was but a humble sheep herder and a sycamore tree farmer from the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

In the eyes of the world, it could be said, that there was no one quite so insignificant as this farmer from Tekoa.

And, some believe that Amos was the first prophet to actually write down his words on a scroll, so he must have been quite literate.

Amos is also considered the prophet of the 99%. In his prophecies, he condemns the rich and powerful for their abuse of the poor and downtrodden.

Amos means literally a "burden carrier." FYI ... in Hebrew prophetic literature, a prophecy is often referred to as a burden.

And what a burden he delivers!

Amos is sent to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and arrives on the scene rather suddenly.

He pronounces the judgement of God upon the surrounding peoples of Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab.

These people had been guilty of sinning against conscience, of inhuman cruelty, slave trading, racism and absolute disrespect for human life (1:3-2:3). The list is long.

One can easily imagine that the people of Israel, whom Amos was addressing, are at first, favorably impressed.

After all, the people of those neighboring cities were the enemies of God's people and outside the covenantal bond God had established with his people.

They were, indeed, without the special privileges of Israel.

They were also guilty of all the atrocities of which they had been accused. Everyone knew that.

It wasn't news to them and it might have been that Amos was heard gladly because he was reinforcing their prejudices.

He was undoubtedly applauded as he denounced one city after another.

The applauding stops very quickly, though, and an uncomfortable silence reigns when Amos says:

"For three transgressions of ISRAEL, and for four I will not revoke the punishment." Yikes!

As the focus shifts from the enemies of God's people to God's people themselves, things change. No longer is the prophet a champion of the people.

It's amazing how much criticism we will tolerate about our enemies and how little we will tolerate about ourselves!

It's like criticizing your family – you can (and maybe do), but nobody else better!

Amos is now pointing his condemning finger straight at Israel.

Just check the back of your bulletin to see the LONG list of things that Amos is condemning.

Do you recognize any in your own life? In the lives of those around you? In our country?

And Amos is quick to condemn those who think they are above the rest.

The tendency in human hearts is either to regard ourselves as favored individuals and above the rest ... or ... the exact reverse. We believe that we are such miserable failures that God would never look at us.

I think this tendency is universal among us. We are always saying to ourselves, "Why is this happening to me?" when tragedy strikes, or when someone else is successful or blessed, we say, "Why couldn't that have happened to me?"

I can't help but think of the story I read online recently. It happened in New York City, during the time of the subway rush in the evening of a hot summer day.

People were jamming into the subway cars as they were moving out of the station and each car was loaded to capacity.

One man happened to be just the last man to push and jam his way inside of a car, and he stood facing the door. The doors closed and the car moved off.

He stood there, packed against this door, pressed up against it with the awful push of humanity in the car.

As it went down the tracks, waving and swaying, he began to feel a little sick.

The further he went, the sicker he got, and just at the critical moment, the car came into a station and the door opened.

And he got sick all over the man standing on the platform right opposite him.

But without anybody moving, the door suddenly closed and the car moved out of the station.

The man on the platform stood there looking at himself, and then he cried out, "Why me?"

Now, when the prophet Amos came to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and started prophesizing against them, this was exactly the reaction he got.

The people of that region looked upon him as though he had just vomited on them.

They were disgusted with him. Their attitude was exactly that.

Why us? Why not go someplace else?

As a matter of fact, that's exactly what the high priest in Israel, a man by the name of Amaziah does.

He hears Amos' preaching against Israel and his king, Jeroboam II. So, he goes out to Amos and confronts him, claims Amos is a charlatan, and tells him to pack up and go prophesy somewhere else.

Amos replies that he is only saying what God has commanded him to.

And then concludes his conversation with Amaziah by telling him as a result of his interference, Amaziah's wife will become a prostitute, his children will be slaughtered, his property seized, and his death will occur in a foreign, hence unclean, land.

So, what can we learn from this little exchange? Don't mess with Amos!

(Of course, there is apocrypha literature that suggests that sometime later, Amos is fatally injured by one of Amaziah's sons.)

Amos is especially perturbed by the affluent lifestyle of the women of Samaria, whom he sarcastically calls "cows of Bashan," who oppress the poor, crush the needy, and who say to their husbands, "Bring me something to drink!"

Amos' comment was probably not the most politically correct statement to make, but the men of Israel were no better.

Oblivious, they apparently spent their time lying on opulent furniture.

They used the most expensive aftershaves, ate at the finest restaurants, guzzled the finest wines by the gallon to the noise of worldly music.

And, they were completely unaffected by the hurt and desperate needs of their fellow human beings.

Amos calls out the rich who have become rich at the expense of the increasing number of the poor.

Amos announces this problem again and again.

“They hate the one who calls for justice in the gate (the place of justice in the ancient city) and abhor the one that speaks the truth.

“As a result, you trample on the poor and snatch from them their necessary grain for living, building houses of well-dressed stones.”

Amos caps his withering assaults against the greedy Israelites with his immemorial words:

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a perennial stream.” (a verse that Martin Luther King, Jr. made famous 50 years ago).

Justice and righteousness is what God demands, rather than fancy festivals, ostentatious offerings, splendid songs, and heavenly harps.

Now I realize that such language is likely to be poison to choir directors and worship leaders.

But ... don't worry we'll keep our splendid songs!

So, let me ask you ... Are we, as a society, seeking justice for the least and the last in America?

Here's the bottom line: When God ceases to be the treasure of your heart, more than likely your heart will fasten itself on the pleasures and comforts of this life.

And unless God graciously intervenes, your addiction to comfort will make you indifferent to honesty and hardened against the poor.

Listen again to Amos' slam the lovers of comfort in 6:1, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure in the mountain of Samaria."

Verse 4: "Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches."

Verse 6: ". . . who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph."

Does that refer to anyone today? People who live for comfort, and do not grieve over the lost.

People who are experts in loving themselves, but have not thought the first thought about what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

What governs your getting and spending? Is it the desire to fill your life with as much comfort as you can?

Or is it the God-given desire to do as much good for others as you can?

Amos is writing at a time when things all seem to be going very well.

But there can be a lot of spiritual danger when things are going well. We just don't talk about that so much.

We talk a lot about what to do in times of sufferings, how to get closer to God in times of trouble and trial, and that is a good right for us to do – even as Jesus prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail in the time of trial.

Bad times can test your faith – but good times can test your faith as well. Moses counseled Israel [[Deuteronomy 6:10-12](#)]

¹⁰ So it shall be, when the LORD your God brings you into the land of which He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you large and beautiful cities which you did not build,

¹¹ houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant – when you have eaten and are full –

¹² then beware, lest you forget the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.

Moses says that when everything is going right – that is the time to be on guard, for it's a time when you are spiritually vulnerable, and all the more because you don't even know it.

The trouble with prosperity is that it is too easy to lose sight of the provider – as we look wide eyed at the provision!

We tend to really seek God when we need him to provide for our needs, but then when that provision is met and we are “comfortable” do we still seek the presence of the Lord with as much gusto?

It’s all too easy when we are facing trials of whatever nature, to turn to God in desperate prayer.

However, when life is good and things are progressing well; it is just as easy to forget to pray at all.

How about us? Do we need to return to God? Have we become complacent in our relationship with God this summer and need to get back on track?

Have we gotten too comfortable in our jobs and communities that we’ve forgotten that God has called us to be His voice in our jobs, at school, and in our communities?

Have we taken His blessings for granted? Have we become discouraged in our trials and forgotten God’s messages of hope?

Truth be told, the book of Amos is mostly gloom and doom. It’s 141 verses focused on Israel’s failure and judgement, and only, get this, five hopeful ones at the end.

But, in the end, Amos was hopeful. After nine chapters of anger and judgement, the prophet saw some light.

There's a day coming when God will "restore" the "house that has fallen," when God will "repair the holes in the roof, replace the broken windows (and) fix it up like new."

That's how Amos ends. And I pray that we will live lives that reflect his call for justice and peace and love, not just for ourselves, but for all people.

Amen!