

Sermon Proper 10 Year C

[RCL] Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

On August 28, 1963, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood before 250,000 people on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC and delivered what would become one of the most famous speeches of the 20th century: his “I Have a Dream” speech. In it, he called for civil rights and economic protections for all people, and decried the systemic racism and violence that haunted every corner of America.

In articulating his vision for a peaceful society that moves away from racism and embraces unity and harmony, King declared, “No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.”¹

With these words, Dr. King, a modern prophet, was recalling the ancient prophet Amos, who first wrote, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

While most modern Biblical scholars confine Amos to the category of a “minor prophet” because of his brevity, if we devote anything less than our full attention to Amos, we do so at our peril. Almost every word of his nine short chapters packs a powerful prophetic word that the Church and culture alike desperately need to hear.

Amos unleashes a prophetic fire against Israel, whose people are suffocating under the weight of systemic injustice and rampant violence. He excoriates the rich and powerful elite who have amassed their position by standing on the necks of the poor, calling out a litany of sins: unfair lending practices, unsustainable agricultural and environmental policy, and gross income inequality – issues that continue to plague our society today.

It doesn’t take long for the people of Israel to realize that Amos is unlike the other so-called prophets of his day. The vocation of prophet itself had become compromised. The so-called prophets that the people were familiar with preached a watered-down message that had more to do with securing their own political and economic position than divinely-inspired truth-telling. And so, Amos proclaims, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees.” Amos makes clear that he is not on the company payroll, and that social, political, and economic concerns have no bearing on the message he proclaims.

Suddenly, the people of Israel are exposed to all that they have conveniently ignored for so long. And so perhaps inevitably, Amos’ firebrand prophetic preaching lands him in trouble. Amaziah, the King’s chaplain, reports that Amos’ prophecy is a direct affront to the king, and that “the land is not able to bear all his words.” As a result, he is banished from the royal chapel and is commanded to return to his home in Judah. One can’t help but wonder how long Amos and other like-minded prophets would survive in the modern pulpit.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream,” speech, 28 August 1963, Washington, D.C.

Truth be told, Amos presents a pastoral paradox that every preacher knows all too well: on one hand, the Gospel message bears an unyielding, uncompromising truth. But on the other hand, the sheer force with which it is proclaimed often proves too harsh to hear for the people who need to hear it the most.

As a result, Christians have become accustomed to being soothed on Sunday morning with a feel-good message that portrays God as little more than a Divine “fixer,” taking our failings and jagged edges, and smoothing them over into something sublime and holy. “God works all things for good,” we say.

But not Amos.

Amos proclaims that God’s patience with recalcitrant and hard-hearted people has come to an end. God has set the plumb line in the midst of Israel, and instead of finding an even plane of justice and righteousness, God has found Israel to be angled against the poor and the helpless, and so God summons Amos to stand and proclaim judgment against Israel.

“...the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword...”

It is little wonder that Amos’ prophecy was so threatening to Amaziah and King Jeroboam. He challenged the *status quo*, demanded justice at the expense of economic gain, and held up faithfulness in the face of the people’s fickle nature.

But what if Amos’ prophetic reach extends beyond Ancient Israel? According to recent studies, we live in a time in which more people are incarcerated in the United States than in any other country on earth;² today, the US spends more money on defense than every other country—and more than the next seven highest spending countries combined;³ and we live in a time when more than 1 in 5 children in the United States lives in poverty.⁴

As we listen to this ancient prophecy fully aware of the truths of our existence that we so often ignore, Amos has a way of stepping out of the pages of Scripture, and marching up the aisle of the church, bearing a message that we desperately need to hear.

Amos teaches us that God does indeed work through our failings and jagged edges to bring about God’s purposes, but not with the kind of “cheap grace” that amounts to little more than a spiritual bailout. God’s grace is free to be sure, but it costs us dearly.

² Roy Walmsley, “World Prison Population List (10th edition)” Report from the International Centre for Prison Studies at the University of Essex,

http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wpp1_10.pdf

³ Report from the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 18 April 2016, http://www.pgpf.org/chart-archive/0053_defense-comparison

⁴ Report from the National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, 2016, <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>

In the face of God's justice, our own injustices are exposed; in the face of God's mercy, our own contempt is brought to bear; and in the face of God's constancy, our own insecurity is revealed.

As James Limburg observes, religion that is authentic to the Biblical witness is not, and has never been about avoiding conflict at all costs. Rather, the witness that Amos and the prophetic tradition proclaims brings comfort to the afflicted; but it also afflicts the comfortable.⁵

The question that Amos leaves us to wrestle with is this: when the prophets of our own day tell us the uncompromising Gospel truth that we've been ignoring about ourselves, will the land be able to bear it?

Will we?

Amen.

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⁵ See: James Limburg, *Amos in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, James L. Mays, ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 79-126.