

Justice Rolls Down
Amos 1:1–2; 5:14–15, 21–24
Amos 7:7-9, 9:8-15

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Amos 1:1–2; 5:14–15, 21–24

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

And he said:

The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.

Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 7:7-9, 9:8-15

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb-line.’ Then the Lord said,

‘See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by; 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.’

...

The eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth —except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the Lord.

For lo, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the ground.

All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, ‘Evil shall not overtake or meet us.’

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name, says the Lord who does this.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord, 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, says the Lord your God.

Let me tell you a story. This is a story about one of God's prophets,¹ a small town good 'ol boy named Amos, based partially on the way that John Spong re-tells the story.²

Amos lives in a one-stoplight town an hour's drive out of Little Rock, Arkansas, where he is a Walmart greeter and a shadetree mechanic, unburdened by any overabundance of schooling.

In this time, the rich grow ever-richer, and are very publicly religious, making sure that they are seen wearing their expensive suits and designer gowns to high-profile worship services and charity benefit events, while the poor keep getting poorer. There seems to be little connection between the words of religion and the lives that people live every day.

Amos sees this, and he can't rest. He gets angry. He packs his bag and gets on the Greyhound bus from his hometown to Wall Street, in the center of the economic capital of the United States, New York City.

When he gets there, he sees the rich and the well-to-do attending to business, ignoring the poor in the street. Amos is the kind of small-town guy who is not going to get an immediate hearing from these city-dwelling sophisticates. He has to figure out how to get people to listen to him. But he ain't stupid.

So, he sets up a soapbox over on the outskirts of the crowd, and he climbs up on it. And he begins to use one of the oldest tricks in rhetoric to get the crowd's attention.

¹ Doland E Gowan, "Amos," in *The New Interpreter's Bible Old Testament Survey*. 398.

² John Shelby Spong, *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*, chapter 16, "Amos: the Prophet who Changed God's Name to Justice." It should be noted, of course, that Rev. Spong is in no way responsible for my interpretation or the direction I have taken this sermon.

“Come on closer, and let me tell you about the sins of the Mexicans.” Everybody likes to hear that other people, and their neighbors in particular, have moral failings. If it works for *The National Enquirer*, it will work for him.

More people wander over to hear him speak, as he turns from the people of Mexico to the peoples of the rest of Latin America. As you might expect, Amos is not a fan of the sinful things that people do in either of those places. The crowd loves it as this seeming rube appeals to their prejudices and confirms their suspicions of their neighbors.

As the crowd gets larger, so do Amos’ targets and the level of his rhetoric. The Syrians are next on his hit parade, and here Amos gets specific. The Syrians have, “pursued their brothers with guns, showing them no pity,” and they have let anger “tear perpetually” at the fabric of their society.³ At this point the crowd is ready to start shouting, “You tell ‘em, preacher!”

ISIS is next, who have beheaded Christians and “ripped up pregnant women in order to enlarge their borders.”⁴ By this time, the crowd is roaring their approval. When Amos gets to talking about the North Koreans, whom his listeners hate, and what God is going to do to them, the crowd is ready to explode.

Now that the crowd is in the palm of his hand and hanging on his every word, Amos almost whispers, “Let me tell you about the sins of rural America.” These rural Americans are the people with whom the city-dwelling Americans are most connected and with whom they have the deepest rivalry. They are also, you’ll recall, Amos’ own people.

³ Qf. Amos 1:11.

⁴ Qf. Amos 1:13.

The city and the country are inextricably connected, socially and economically. Many families have members in both regions. It is a dysfunctional relationship. Each side in this rivalry is convinced that the other is not living properly.

As heated as the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry gets, I've never heard someone here in Columbus tell me I must be mistaken when I say I know Christians in Ann Arbor (Just for the record, that's a good thing – I am not suggesting that rivalry should be any stronger). But I've heard that kind of language on both sides of this city-rural divide.

So anything Amos has to say bad about rural America is music to the people's ears. He says that they have rejected the Scriptures and everything in them. He says that they have no idea about God's commandments of hospitality to people who don't look like them. Or God's commands to love their neighbors, even neighbors who have not lived in that spot for four generations. But judgment is coming, he promises, and their world will be destroyed.

By this point, Amos has everyone's complete attention. No one is listening to anyone else. No one is doing anything else but listening to the prophet.

“But let me tell you about the *worst people in the whole world*,” Amos goes on, and you could hear a pin drop.

“The worst people in God's whole world reside in American cities and the suburbs! You make a big deal out of being seen in Church on Sunday, but on Monday morning you sell the righteous for silver and the poor for the price of a pair of sneakers. You trample the weak into the dust of the earth and push the handicapped out of your way to get to sales. You sexually violate the powerless.⁵ When the powerless are gunned down by those only slightly more powerful, you

⁵ Amos 2:6-7.

say meaningless things about thoughts and prayers, and you do nothing to stop the next massacre.

“Every garment you wear even to Church comes from exploiting the poor, and every drop of wine you drink comes from rigging the system in your own favor! You corrupt holy people and you silence God’s prophets.”⁶

“All this is despite the fact that God destroyed your enemies, who were far stronger than anything you could handle. God brought you up, and gave you many times your share of the Earth’s resources. God raised up some of your children to be priests and some to be prophets. I don’t know how God could have been any better to you, and you respond like this.

“The day of the Lord is coming, and I can’t understand why you would want that day to ever come.” Amos’ voice is rising as he gets more excited.

“God’s expectations for you are clear, like a plumb line, and you do not measure up. God’s judgment will be like what would happen if someone is running away from a lion, and is met by a bear.”

He finally screams, “This judgement is unavoidable!”

There is complete silence as the people digest what Amos has said, and then Amos goes on with the insights that they need to hear.

Worship isolated from the rest of your life is worthless. If you worship God on the Sabbath but that has no noticeable effect on your life the rest of the week, then you’re not genuinely worshipping God on the Sabbath. You are worshipping your own status and position, and the system that gives you both.

⁶ Amos 2:12.

The meanest, most abject example of humanity you see is fearfully and wonderfully made by God, in God's own image. Justice is the least that you owe them.

The poor being exploited for the benefit of the rich is not justice.

The powerless being used as sexual playthings by rich and powerful men is not justice.

The United States is the only nation in the world with a functioning government where mass shootings happen multiple times a week.⁷ They don't all make the news any more. Children dying is not acceptable collateral damage for ideology, or for corporate profits. This is not justice for anyone. Thoughts and prayers are not working without action.

Without justice, God is not pleased with your festivals and your solemn assemblies. God wants you to take away your songs and your beautiful music. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."⁸

Once they have recovered enough to think clearly, a building manager calls the police. The police tell this hick from the sticks they can't talk like this without a permit.

Amos responds, "In conclusion, ..." and he sums up what he has to say. "Because you trample the poor, your worship is worthless. You cannot worship God while you treat the poor and the powerless as less than you are. Because you do this, the time is surely coming, says the Lord, when I will send a famine on the land, and your feasts will turn into mourning and your celebration songs will turn into lamentation."

At this point, the crowd physically drives Amos from the street, and he gets back on the bus and goes home. They never hear Amos' conclusion.

They heard Amos say that justice is worship to God.

⁷ <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-many-mass-shootings-in-america-las-vegas-shooting-2017-10>.

⁸ Amos 5:24.

They heard him say that failing to do justice is failing to worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

BUT ...

They never hear Amos say that God will punish them as they deserve, but that God will restore them.

They never hear Amos say that God will never quit loving God's people.

They never hear Amos say that, if we love God, then the "love language" that God hears has to do with treating all of God's children with justice, and compassion, and mercy, and humility.⁹

So, how much of this story is true?

All of it.

All of it is God's Truth.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

⁹ "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" – Micah 6:8