

“God’s Judgment is Also Our Grace”

Prologue: Last Sunday, I read from Amos chapter 7 and delivered a sermon regarding God’s call to the farmer Amos to be a prophet ... a prophet who delivers God’s message to Israel. Amos is a sheep farmer who also tends an orchard. He lives in the southern kingdom of Judah and is sent north to Israel to speak a harsh word that is contrary to the messages King Jeroboam II is receiving from the temple priest Amaziah. Amos prophesies at a time when Israel will suffer what is for her the worst of all possible fates. God will no longer speak. There will be a great drought or “famine of God’s Word.” Up to this point when Israel has sinned time and time again, God has come back and resumed the conversation with His people. No more! Amos tells of that terrible day when the conversation will end. Why is God so angry with Israel? God’s wrath is kindled over injustice. The injustices are detailed and quite specific. The wealthy arrogantly trample the needy. Political corruption consumes the land ... unethical business practices virtually enslave the poor.

I was taught in seminary that “every Christian sermon ought to contain a word of grace as well as judgment.” This is to say that sermons ought not to be *just* about God’s wrath, but always tempered with a word about God’s amazing grace. However, this morning we are faced with a biblical text that seems to be exclusively about judgment ... the wrath of God poured out fiercely upon a disobedient people. Therefore, to be faithful to the voice of this text from Amos, I think that it is appropriate for today’s sermon to be judgmental. However, I would add ... and I truly believe this ... the judgments of God are an aspect of God’s grace as well ... thus the title of my message is: “God’s Judgment is Also Our Grace.” [*Read the lesson from Amos 8: 1-12*]

Message: Soren Kierkegaard said a long time ago that “purity of heart is to will one thing.” People who don’t read Kierkegaard may attribute that insight to the character played by Jack Palance in the movie *City Slickers*. The secret of life, he tells Billy Crystal, is “one thing.” What is it? Ah! ... *that’s* the question. For *City Slickers*, and possibly for Kierkegaard, identification of the “one thing” may not have been all that important --- the point was simply to have a goal, an uncomplicated focus that gives life meaning and purpose. In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells Martha that only one thing is needful, and that Mary has found it. The one thing is Jesus himself, and he is found through the Word of God. On the other hand, for Amos, the one thing is the tragedy of a nation that has failed to do the only thing that was absolutely necessary for it to do --- hear and heed the Word of God!

Allow me to first walk you through the lesson interpreting the rich symbols, and then connect the passage to today’s circumstances. We pick up almost where we left off last week, with the gloom of Amos’ prophecies. Amos sees another vision ... the fourth vision ... the vision of a fruit basket. For some reason this is a sign that the end has come for Israel. Why? How can a symbol of prosperity, a basket full of fruit, symbolize the end? Ah, the Hebrew words for “summer fruit” and “end” though not spelled a like, do sound a like. Amos at first sees a welcome pleasant sight, but then God says, “No! Not ‘summer fruit’ but ‘the end’ is what awaits Israel!” Thus, the image is appropriate for the paradox expressed in what follows – wealthy landowners view their prosperity as a sign for the future, but a slight shift of perspective reveals it to be a sign of doom. This may be a word of caution to us, as we experience this week the Dow Jones punching its way through the 14,000 level giving us a sense of a healthy economy while the reality is ... we are a nation in debt 8.5 trillion dollars!!

In verses four through six, Amos reveals the reason Israel is doomed – the nation as a whole has failed to protect and provide for its most disadvantaged members. The days of Amos were a time of economic transition. Increased urbanization has transformed the classless peasant society through the introduction and development of commerce. People had discovered ways of securing their own fortune at the expense of others. One was the simple trick of using two weights for the conduct of business --- a small one (an ephah) for determining what the customer received and a larger one (a shekel) for determining what the merchant received. The merchants of Israel were so greedy for gain, however, that when they were allowed to open for business, they cheated their innocent customers.

They made the small weight smaller. That is, the standard forty-liter vessel used to measure out grain was secretly reduced in size. The “shekel,” which weighted about 11.5 grams and was put on a balance scale to determine how much silver was owed for the grain, was made heavier, thus costing the customer more money. Even the balance scales were “false,” bent, so that they did not weigh accurately. The poor could not afford such dishonesty and fell into debt to the merchants, while the merchants made enough extra cash to buy one of the poor as a slave for the meager price of a pair of sandals.

But the poor were desperate for food, and so at times they scraped up the leavings of grain that had the chaff mixed in with it. And for even that, the greedy merchants charged them. The problem, Amos responds, is dehumanization --- people are being bought and sold like so many material objects. Verse 6 refers to simply the economic bondage that result when the wealthy are able to determine the course of other people’s lives. This certainly makes me wonder about the easy accessibility of credit and credit cards ... and sub prime lending!! I even seriously question the *motivation* of states to fund programs by use of the lottery and gambling. When you think about it, “economic bondage” is an interesting term!

Verse seven through twelve takes up again the promise of doom, with both graphic and poetic language. God's awful promise never to forget their evil deeds means there is no forgiveness. How can we live without God's forgiveness? We can't! And I must admit that I am personally offended by Amos' presentation of "baldness as a horrible fate." However the commentator James Mays assures me that what this means is that the people would shave their heads because they are in great mourning. Thus, the threat of "baldness on every head" indicates that all will mourn when the end comes.

Finally, the compelling image of the "famine of the Word of God" alludes to the terrible consequence of neglecting that Word when it is available. The day will come when those who are now so cavalier about the Word of God will long for it, but they will seek it in vain. The Lord has spoken, says the prophet, and soon ... will quit speaking --- and in that silence lies the most terrible judgment of all. The thought of God giving up on us because we no longer pay attention to His commandments ... the idea of God no longer listening to our prayers ... because we only love ourselves and no longer love God or love the neighbor ... the idea of God not listening is a very frightening thought!!

Why is God so angry with the people of Israel? That which has angered God so severely is pure economics. God is upset over Israel's business practices that have caused a great disparity between his people. The gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is morally too far a part. Amos says God cares about this. When we look closely at our own society, we discover that this, too, is a problem. Over two decades, the income gap has steadily increased between the richest Americans, who own homes and stocks and got big tax breaks, and those at the middle and bottom of the pay scale, whose paychecks buy less.

The growing disparity is even more pronounced as wages are stagnant and the middle class is shouldering a larger tax burden. Prices for health care, housing, tuition, gas and food have soared. According to the Census Bureau, the wealthiest 20 percent of households in 1973 accounted for 44 percent of total U.S. income. Their share jumped to 50 percent in 2002, while everyone else's fell. For the bottom fifth, the share dropped from 4.2 percent to 3.5 percent. That's despite the fact that today workers are working longer hours than they have ever had, and the country is richer than it has ever been. Even Warren Buffett says this is a serious problem for the country!

Amos tells the people of Israel that God refuses to speak because of economic abuses. There are moments when I think we live in a time where there is a "famine of the Word" and God seems far away. Of course we are a very busy people ... we are a scientific, critically thinking people, and perhaps that's the problem ... in order to cope, we compartmentalize our lives. Out there we do business ... business is business. In here, we are spiritual ... we are religious. Often these compartmentalized worlds never meet. Ah, but not in today's Scripture ... here the Bible is very specific ... painfully economic. And God is angry!

During a visit by an African bishop, he was asked, "What do you think is the greatest challenge faced by young people today?" The bishop responded: *Perhaps it is because I am visiting North America, but I would say the greatest challenge, I believe, is your materialism. Here, there seems to be so much, so much of everything. Christianity does not do well in such a climate. Where life is filled with so much, there is not enough room for God to get in. Money is always the problem, according to Scripture, never the solution.* Is this what Amos is speaking about when he says that, in an Israel of riches and great wealth, there will come a famine, not a famine of things and possessions, but a "famine of the word of God?" More possessions ... less word of God.

So, where are we this lovely July day? We have heard the harsh, direct word of the prophet Amos --- a word meant to provoke rigorous self-examination in each of us. The questions raised seem relevant. What are the concerns in our life that consume us? What desires eat away at our marriages, our family life, our relationship to other people? What responsibility do we have for the less fortunate in our society? Today's lesson is a word of judgment upon our heads. And yet, behind this tough text from Amos is a word of grace.

Though it may be difficult, we ought to give thanks that God cares enough about us to speak the truth to us. Thank God that He does not keep His word in this text. This God does not remain silent. This God sends truthful prophets like Amos to us to grab our attention, to speak the truth, painful though it may be. You may have come to this service of worship looking for comfort, for peace, calm, and reassurance. Many Sundays, that is what is offered. But this Sunday, what is offered is also the truth. You are not left to your own devices. You may wonder why there is such a lack of contentment in your life ... why there is that gnawing sense of non-fulfillment ... why there are problems in your marriage, your family, your relationships, your work. This text loves you enough to name the problems and the problems have names like: greed ... materialism ... entitlement ... arrogance. And for that truthfulness, I suppose we ought to be thankful. Amen.