

November 12, 2017
Flee from a Lion to Be Met by a Bear
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Amos 1:1-2, 5:6-24

¹ *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.*

² *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.*

[Amos 5:6-24]

⁶ *Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.*

⁷ *Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!*

⁸ *The one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the Lord is his name,*

⁹ *who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.*

¹⁰ *They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.*

¹¹ *Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.*

¹² *For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.*

¹³ *Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.*

¹⁴ *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.*

¹⁵ *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.*

¹⁶ *Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord:*

In all the squares there shall be wailing;

and in all the streets they shall say, "Alas! alas!"

They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing;

¹⁷ *in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the Lord.*

¹⁸ *Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light;*

¹⁹ *as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.*

²⁰ *Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?*

²¹ *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

²² *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.

²³ *Take away from me the noise of your songs;*

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Amos preached about the mistreatment of the weak and poor of society in his day. If he were preaching today, can you think of anything current in our society he might find to talk about?

He wasn't from Israel, you know? He was a southern preacher, from Judah. And not a preacher by choice. By choice he was a sheep rancher and a *dresser of sycamore trees*. We looked that up in Bible study. A dresser of sycamore trees went around and pricked holes in the fruit so bugs wouldn't eat it up. "Dresser of sycamore trees" does have a better ring than "pricker of sycamore fruits," don't you know.

Back to the point: what might Amos find to talk about in our time and place? Russian collusion? The age-old predatory behavior of men in power? Gun violence? Tax reform? No doubt we'd like to think so. We educated, white people sitting a comfortable distance from all those subjects. Or maybe not. But poverty ought to make our list, since what Amos said then still goes now.

Times were good in Israel in 786 BCE. Employment was high and prices were low. International relationships were calm and trade was strong. The country was wealthy, healthy and at peace. King Jeroboam was on the throne, living large and grateful for the good fortune of running a country with so few problems. But the lot of the poor – the alarmingly poor – among them figured into no one's assessment of society or life together as the so-called people of God.

That is, until a sheep farmer from the south showed up at the Temple in Bethel (which was in the north), preaching worry and woe to anyone who would listen – about what a mess everything really was and how if they didn't turn it around and straighten up, if they did not "*Seek good instead of evil, Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate*" they would not live long in the land.

One of my favorite lines is chapter 1, verse 2, in which Amos makes clear where his loyalty lies: *The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem* (which was in the South); *the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up* (which was in the North). Get it? God lives down South with us and has sent me up here to deal with y'all.

But nobody much listened to Amos. Most everything Amos promised eventually came true, though not for a good long while after he preached it. God sent several more prophets with the same message. Nobody much listened to them either. Because stories get told is no guarantee they get heard – amen? Because when times are really good for you and me, who wants to hear that they aren't good for someone else? Who wants to be told that the poor are our problem?

Could it be that in the time of Amos it was also true that any public debate or conversation or commentary about the economy is only and always and ever considerate of the rich and the middle class? Of the corporate and the private? But no one ever speaks for or about the poor. Why is that? Because the poor don't vote? Or because they don't give to political campaigns? And in those conversations and debates, an economy in which the poor languish can be an altogether thriving economy. According to the Federal Reserve. Or Wall Street. Or Kai Ryssdal.

But not according to the Bible. Not according to the prophets. Not according to God. For God, an economy that thrives for some while others are cheated and enslaved and starved is not

thriving. It is unjust. Being unjust, it violates the nature of God and God's intention for Creation. Justice is foundational to creation itself, the design of the universe itself, how we are meant to live with each other and in relationship to God.

Justice and righteousness – almost interchangeable words. There is an order to creation in which humanity is the crown, if you will: God's favorite piece, God's own partners in caring for the rest of it. Each and every human is of immeasurable value to God, by virtue of being God's. When and where justice reigns, people are regarded and treated according to their God-given value. They are treated *right*. When and where people are treated *right*, justice reigns. Creation is functioning as it should. We are God's partners in setting things to rights, maintaining justice, correcting injustice. Whenever and wherever justice reigns in the world, we come more in line with the original design and intention for creation.

But the world over, this is not the case. Alabama is a good example. When public school districts are arranged by the value of the properties around those schools, so that one school's facilities are state-of-the-art for sciences and the arts, while the school across town has poison water and the students have hookworm (a true situation in Alabama as we speak¹), in such instances, injustice not only exists – it is legalized, systematized and sanctioned by every single person who votes for the government that sustains such a system!

Friends, Amos wouldn't have to change a word except the place names, to write about us – here and now. No economy, society, political entity is so perfectly arranged that God will not see those who suffer in it, or for it. And neither will God fail to see those who thrive on the basis of that suffering. The same economies that keep some poor keep some affluent.

One way we can live so well is because we can buy so cheap. And we can buy so cheap because **some** labor is so cheap. Labor: another word for human blood, sweat and years of life gone by. A \$650 smartphone made in China would cost \$2K if made entirely in the US. Each phone has about \$5 of labor in it, approximately \$3.50 an hour². Some argue that *the cost of living is cheaper; what the market will bear; blah, blah, blah*. I would argue that we want our toys to cost \$650 and we aren't going to work for \$3.50 an hour. And God knows we need our phones.

I hear Amos asking us collectively, as a people – consciously or not – have you not decided with your dollars that the blood, sweat and years of some humans are worth less than of some other humans? Do not go home and say, "*Pastor Annette says we all have to give up our smartphones or we are all jerks.*" Because you know you won't. I won't either. But we can at least go home and go shopping acknowledging that one person's injustice is another person's privilege.

Of course it's hard to look at. Injustice is always uncomfortable for people who both benefit from it AND recognize it as injustice. Remember what baby Mariah said when Dr. Keith said *no more pacifier*? She wailed all the way home from the dentist: *But I love my passy. It makes me feel better.*

What Israel did in the time of Amos was: pretend they didn't hear what he was saying. Because a story didn't get heard didn't mean it didn't get told. We also sometimes pretend we didn't hear what we heard. Or we adapt what we heard to what we need to believe to be comfortable in

¹ (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/05/hookworm-lowndes-county-alabama-water-waste-treatment-poverty>)

² (<https://www.marketplace.org/2014/05/20/business/ive-always-wondered/how-much-would-all-american-iphone-cost>)

the privilege to which we've grown accustomed. Tempting it is. But we are the people of God. And, praise be to God, we've been given these people called prophets who come along to warn us about the cost of giving in to the temptation. We shuffle through the years enjoying ourselves and calling every good thing that comes our way a blessing, thinking God must totally be on our side in every possible way. Just like Israel in the time of Amos.

He quotes some of them, the people looking forward to God showing up to visit: *“Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light.”* Are you kidding me, Amos asks, that is NOT going to be a good day! – *“like fleeing a lion to be met by a bear; or leaning on a wall and finding out it’s a snake!”*

Their blissful wish for the coming of the Lord exposes their naiveté, or their simple denial, of the reality in which they live. They REALLY believe things aren't that bad. Which would be fine – if they did not also call themselves *the people of God*.

How do they get there? Because they haven't read their Bibles? Because they don't remember a single thing Jesus ever said? Because they haven't even begun to see their world through the eyes of God? Because they have never considered the economy in which they are doing so well, by the measures of justice and righteousness made plain in the scriptures and in the preaching of prophets?

Israel might still have redeemed herself in the days of Amos, when Assyria was not yet at the door. But they didn't. Apparently, not for 200 years did they even know why everything had, as I like say, *gone to poo* and landed them in Babylon. I suppose someone found Amos's old sermons, in one of those libraries where all the books are chained to the shelves. *Wow, all that time ago Amos was telling us what we needed to do, and nobody listened.*

You hate the one who seeks justice at court, you deny the one who speaks the truth, you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain; you afflict the righteous, and take a bribe; you push aside the needy in the gate, turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

Don't let the poetry fool you. Amos is telling of everyday offenses against the weak in society: refusing to listen to their grievances; stealing their crops by paying too little for them; punishing the innocent; taking bribes; and refusing to do right by the needy. I love, love, love his metaphor. Just when you think you've outrun the lion, a bear appears.

History tells us what Amos never got to know: the lion was Assyria and Babylon was the bear. By then it was too late and the descendants of those who ignored Amos paid dearly for their ancestors' ignorance. But was it ignorance? Or was it passive oblivion to the injustice and evil in their own time and place? their willful choice to enjoy the benefits of a broken economy without regard for how God intended creation to work from the beginning?

The tragedy isn't just what humans will do to themselves, but what we will do to our children and grandchildren. Until a year ago, I believed ours was a better country than it is. Until a year ago I believed our country was at one time better than I now believe it ever was. And all I had to do was read a little deeper and look at things I hadn't wanted to see before. As our country raised itself it also raised a myth about itself that wasn't ever as true as our country believed it was.

I'm talking about that “*one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all*” part. With all my heart I believe we want to believe that about ourselves. Such a belief costs little. But as a way of life, *unity, liberty and justice for all* is hugely expensive and works against ordinary human nature. At every turn, it demands that each of us work constantly for the betterment of all of us more fervently than we work for the betterment of ourselves.

As a country we have, on occasion, risen to it. There is no denying that. But *on occasion* is not when the real work of *unity, liberty and justice for all* is accomplished. That real work gets done day in and day out for years and years and years and years. By people with the eyes and ears and hearts to imagine that each of us is better off when all of us are thriving. And I am without-a-doubt-in-my-bones convinced that the only people even remotely prepared for that kind of work over the long haul of history are people who know the Lord. It's otherwise too crushing.

The people who eat the meal at a Fifth Feast are alarmingly poor. Most are drug- and/or alcohol-addicted. Not a few of them smell really, really amazing. By amazing I mean *amazingly bad*. We served whole apples last month – big mistake; their teeth can't take it. We gave the apples to the Episcopal choir. Episcopalians have very nice teeth. These people who come to eat at a Fifth Feast are a cupful of the broken-down humanity Amos preached about. They live in our very midst; but, suffice it to say, our city and society do not see them as immeasurably valuable.

Two blocks east, Kilroy's is jammed – with beautiful people, many of them as equally hung over as the Fifth Feast guests. Most of those beautiful people with very nice teeth are also eating a meal that they themselves will not be paying for. For all the similarity, the city values them profoundly. They've cleared the park across the street so the pretty people don't have to see the dirty people anymore.

Now I would not care to guess the names of the lions behind us nor the bears before us. But I've no doubt we are in the middle, and it's past time to change our ways. Justice will come – with or without us – one day, like a mighty stream, like a flood. Is that good news? Or not?

Friends, to call ourselves *God's people*, we have to learn to see our world with God's eyes – humanity first of all – recognize the injustice all around us, and do our bit to make it right. Otherwise, what are we doing here? Not only that – where are we going? And what are we bequeathing to the ones who will come after us?