

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Amos Speaks

Amos 8:4-7

9/22/13

This morning I'd like to share with you a sermon based on our Old Testament reading from Amos. In fact I'm going to share this sermon in the voice, of the prophet Amos.

So I want you to use your imagination this morning as you listen to what Amos has to say:

Hello, my name is Amos and I'm here to share with you the story of the time God called me to be a prophet. Many people have asked me what impact this period in my life had, and I'm eager to share it with you. I have a feeling that you may benefit from what I have to say in ways you might not expect.

In those days, I was a shepherd and vine dresser from Tekoa, a small village south of Jerusalem in the Kingdom of Judah when Uzziah was King. It was the 8th Century BC.

My life was a quiet and simple one. I enjoyed my life and I took pride in my work, caring for my flock, and for the juicy figs that were so popular in my area. But one day, as I was resting against a tree in my orchard, I felt that God was calling me to do something greater, something rather daring. I believed that God was asking me to go to the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel where Jereboam II was king. It was not entirely clear to me what it was I was expected to do there, but I sensed some urgency about this and I trusted that God would reveal what I was to do.

You can imagine that the whole thing sounded a bit strange to me at first, especially when I told others what I felt called to do. "You, Amos," they said? "What do you know about the politics and religious life of the Northern Kingdom? You don't even know much about those things right here in the Southern Kingdom." "Don't be deceived," some told me. "This is just a delusion. You'll not only get yourself in trouble, and you may end up losing your life."

I thought about what everyone said a great deal, but finally I knew I had to go. I packed up and headed for Bethel. It took me about a week, and I didn't tell too many people along the way what I was doing because I felt they might not understand.

Coming from a small village, I was surprised when I got there.

The city was substantial with many buildings constructed of stone. The temple was not as grand as the one in Jerusalem, but it was appropriate for a capital city.

People in the streets were dressed well, and there was a lot of activity. You could tell that people were well off. There was plenty of food and water, not to mention wine and fruit. Meat was sold in the market, along with vegetables and breads.

As I visited with people in a friendly way, I got some invitations to join them for lunch in their homes. Some of them were quite extravagant. They had well-made furniture, they set their tables lavishly and they had servants to wait on them.

There did seem to be something wrong about the whole setting, however. People were pretty self-centered. Their main interest seemed to be in improving their status among their business and social acquaintances. When they talked about others, it was often in a condescending way, in order to help you appreciate how much better off than others they were.

Their religious life was rather superficial. They went to the temple on special occasions to make sacrifices or to pray, but otherwise this didn't seem to have much impact on their lives. When you learned about the ethics of their business practices or the way they treated people, you really wondered what their religion meant to them.

At that time, I began to have a better idea about why God had wanted me to come there. I can't explain exactly why I felt this way, but one day I felt compelled to go up to the temple and express publicly my concerns about some of the practices that I had observed. As I began to speak, it was as if somebody else was speaking through me because the words just flowed, and they took on power as I spoke.

This is what I told them:

*You build mansions, but wanting even more, you build vacation homes;
You adorn your furniture with ivory and precious metals;
You recline on couches, and tell the servants, "bring me a drink;"
You love to eat leg of lamb and prime cuts of beef;
You plant lush vineyards and relish the grapes and the wine they produce;
You brag how much you give for temple offerings;
You use the only finest of cosmetics and swill wine in huge goblets!*

And then do you know what happened?

You would think the people I preached to would've been angry and walked out.

But these words seemed to strike a familiar chord.

A crowd started to gather, and they were listening.

And then, suddenly, as if from beyond me, these words started to overwhelm both the people and me: I spoke again:

*You who are listening: you don't care about the poor;
And you deny justice to the oppressed;
You can't wait for the Sabbath to end so you can sell the floor sweepings with the wheat;
You skimp on what you give for the price and you use dishonest scales;
When people are at their last penny, you send them away as if they were nobodies!
Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile.*

Finally, the priest of the temple, Amaziah, came out and told me to stop. "Get out of here," he said. "Don't use any of your professional preacher tactics around here, because these are good people, and you've gone too far."

I told Amaziah, "I'm not a professional preacher at all.

I'm a nobody that God chose to use. You tell me to stop preaching? This is what I tell you:

*"Your wife will become a prostitute, and your sons and daughters will die by the sword.
Your country will be chopped up and you will die in a pagan land!"*

I thought to myself, "Amos, you've lost it!" I was sure they were going to kill me. But gradually a sense of peace overcame me and I realized that I was about to say what I had come to say.

And so I said it, with a voice that no longer trembled:

*God hates your religious feasts; he can't stand your solemn assemblies;
Away with all your singing and praying.
Let justice roll on like a river; and righteousness like an ever flowing stream!*

I could see that some eyes were bloodshot and some people had clenched their fists.

Yet I came to understand that there is a judgment that speaks louder than words.

It is one thing to criticize someone. It is one thing to concern yourself with certain immoralities and improprieties.

It is quite another thing, however, to discover that you are dealing with something that is at God's very heart. And what lies at the very heart of God is a passionate concern for the poor, for those who cannot speak for themselves.

I came to learn in my preaching that God loves all people, but when he sees you turning on those whom he loves but cannot defend themselves, he gets very angry. This anger, I learned, comes from his heart of love. And this love speaks so powerfully that the people that day had to hear it-just as you do.

From that point on, the words flowed less painfully.
There was joy in what I felt compelled to say.

I knew there were serious times ahead. In looking back, I didn't understand everything that would be involved. I didn't know it would include captivity by a pagan nation and enslavement for years on foreign soil. However, one thing I knew was true: that God loved this people and wanted them as his own. Sometimes he would shake them, even in the presence of other nations.

But his intent was to restore them, to build them with his love as they used to be, as He had created them to be. And as I shared these words, I wept inside and out. It was overpowering to me to understand that no matter how much we fail God, he will never fail and desert us.

That was many years ago, but I still remember how God used me in a remarkable way. And the lessons he inspired me to preach are with me to this day. I wonder if I can share them with you.

First, I learned that God has a long and surprising history of using average people to share his will with others. I am just a shepherd and tree-pruner, but I was given a chance to tell people what God wants more than anything else in their lives. And He wants to use you in some surprising way as well.

Second, I learned that God loves everyone, and is very concerned that you share that love with others. If there are people in your community who are being shunned or disregarded, or if there are outsiders who need an advocate, no matter their shortcomings or sins, you are called to care for them just as surely as God cares for you.

Third, I learned that unlike us, God does not rate sin. Sin is sin.
Sin is missing the mark. It is falling short of loving God and our neighbor.
It is letting the love for money, or work or leisure, or anything else, take the place of God.

When we are greedy. When we are more interested in our own comfort than in the suffering of others, then God will convict us, and call us back to Him.

When you return to God, God will give you a new heart.
Then you will see God's justice flow like a river, and God's righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I'm Amos, and my name in Hebrew means "burden."
My burden has been to help people find God's hope in the midst of personal despair.
And it is your burden as well.

"What does the Lord require of you?"
Our burden, our call, is to: "Act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God."

Let that be your call today. Amen.¹

¹ [Sermon on Amos 8:4-7, based on character interpretation by David Zersen](#)