

Amos

Today starts a six-week series on the prophets. We're starting with Amos. I'd encourage you to read the whole book of Amos. It's fairly short – only 10 chapters and the chapters aren't very long.

But if you do, buckle up. Amos does not mince any words. Of all the prophets, he is probably the clearest about what Israel's problem was.

Another thing about the prophets...you cannot deal with the prophets without bringing in politics. The harshest words of the prophets, especially Amos, were primarily directed at the ruling class, the wealthy, and the religious elite who mostly backed them. The leaders set the tone for the nation, and with a handful of exceptions, the rulers and Temple elite were corrupt and idolatrous.

If the prophets are going to say anything to us today, we can't avoid the critique they offer on our own political lives. And Amos for sure makes it pretty darn clear what angers God.

Let's get ourselves into the historical setting here. Last week we heard about the prophet Elijah. We're now about 140 years later. The Kingdom has been split since Solomon's son's reign about 200 years before Amos.

The northern kingdom is Israel. The southern is Judah.

Amos was minding his own business, tending his farm in the southern Kingdom of Judah. A vision from God came to him and sent him to the northern Kingdom of Israel to prophesy. The first verse, as do most prophetic oracles, pinpoints the historical time of Amos's prophetic call.

OK, another important point. At this time, things are actually going really well for Israel. There's peace. There's enormous prosperity. Many are able to live lavish, posh lives. By secular standards, King Jeroboam the second has done a fantastic job.

Yet the Lord is roaring. What's up with that?

Amos begins his prophesy by pronouncing God's words against the surrounding nations. Damascus, Tyre, Gaza, Edom...the nations surrounding Israel received God's judgement for their violence.

With each pronouncements of God's judgement, you can maybe hear Amos's hearers...yes! Tyre...Yep...Edom...yep...they are bad actors. They need some serious smiting Lord!

Then, Amos gets to Judah. Judah has not been faithful to God's instructions and statutes. OK, that's starting to get a little closer to home. But still, God surely must be happy with Israel, the chosen people.

But then, Amos unleashes on Israel. The rest of the book is primarily God's word against Israel. And here's where it starts. Israel is under God's judgement

because they sell the righteous for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals—

⁷they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth
and push the afflicted out of the way;

Through Amos, God reminds them what God has done for them...God led them out of slavery in Egypt...God provided for them in the wilderness...God shaped them into God's holy people through the law given on Mt. Sinai.

In some ways Israel is even worse than the other nations...because after all, they've been God's people for centuries. They should know better!

Perhaps one of the most famous verses in all of the old testament comes from Amos –

Let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Martin Luther King Jr. used that verse in his I Have a Dream speech and in his Letter from a Birmingham jail. In fact, if you want to hear what Amos might have said in the mid 20th century, I'd encourage you to read MLK's Letter from a Birmingham jail.

In a nutshell, what all the prophets railed against were essentially two things – idol worship and injustice. Some emphasized one more than the other, and Amos didn't actually say much about idol worship.

What he did have something to say about was worship that maintained all the rituals and special holidays and sacrificial system, but which didn't lead to a community that lived by God's justice. And make no mistake, this wasn't just judgement on individual people. It was communal judgement on the entire nation.

Let's define what the prophets...and for that matter all of scripture, including the teachings of Jesus...meant by justice. One of my seminary professors, on the narrative lectionary podcast said this: justice is when the world is ordered the way God wants.

We know the ten commandments which is a pretty good start. Jesus boiled them down to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

The law given to the people of Israel ordered the world in such a way that the well-being of the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreign born residents would be tended to. The

laws governed things like cheating, lying, stealing, but also extortion and bribery. There were laws created specifically to provide for the poor.

God's law was a criminal code in part. That's often what we think of first when we think of justice.

But it also governed distributive justice...a way of life that provided for all to have what they needed.

Amos's message especially targeted the rich who lived lavishly while the peasants scraped and struggled to get by. It targeted the rulers who focused on amassing more wealth while the poor struggled. It targeted those who took bribes to advantage the rich over the poor. It targeted exploitive economic practices that benefited the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

Ultimately, Amos prophesied that Israel was doomed to destruction for its sins. Think about how ludicrous that must have sounded at the time. After all, King Jerobaom II made Israel great. Nothing could touch them.

But God made it clear that prosperity and absence of war were not markers of divine favor. Israel had lost God's favor for its treatment of the people whose needs were great...those who Jesus would later call the least of these in a passage known as the judgment of the nations.

And lest anyone think that their personal piety and worship was all that was needed, Amos had words for that too. I hate I despise your festivals. I'm not interested in your offerings at the altar. Your music is just noise.

Worship and way of life go hand in hand. And it's all designed to create the sort of just and right world God intended.

The prophets were like a mirror held up to the people in charge...they were a mirror held up to the wealthy...they were a mirror that reflected to the kings and the priests and the wealthy so that they could see their failure to keep up their end of God's covenant and where it would lead.

So what should we do with the prophets today? Lest we say, well that's just the Old Testament, Jesus didn't undo any of the words of the prophets. In fact Jesus acted as a prophet, speaking truth to the religious rulers who were the defacto kings of Israel in his day.

Jesus' teachings were not about following the letter of the law. Rather Jesus taught about being transformed by love, such that we truly desire the well-being of all people.

He also taught that we cannot rest comfortably in comfort and riches when others are hungry.

That we cannot rest comfortably when Immigrants are treated as subhuman.

The readings from the prophets are not ones that are likely to make most of us feel comfortable. Amos's words can still hit pretty hard.

In these fraught times we live in, I would encourage all of us to spend some time with Amos and ask the question, what would God have Amos say to us today?

Well, in the end Amos's words were not just about judgement and destruction. There would come a time of rebuilding and new life. There was still hope. The present hope was that the words of Amos and the other prophets would lead to repentance.

But, there was also a future hope. God's anger would never be the last word, and whatever happened, there was still a future.

The words of the prophets remind us not only of the world that God desires, but the world God is creating. The words of the prophets point to the one who will come to bring that world into being in a whole new way.

And the words of the prophets remind us that that world will be a place where all...from poorest to richest...will experience what Jesus will later call the kingdom of God.