

Faith Mennonite Church
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The flow of justice: risk and hope
Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24

The role of prophet in ancient Israel usually functioned in relationship with the role of king. Whereas the king wielded the *power* of office, of resources, and of military strength, the prophet was a *voice of conscience*, bringing the word of God to the king and to the people. Some kings consulted with the prophets, at times honestly seeking wisdom from God. At other times they were simply looking for a rubber stamp on what they intended to do. All too frequently they tried to muzzle the message of the prophets when they spoke in opposition to the king.

While many men longed to be king, few, if any, were itching to be prophet. The role was a lonely one, often a risky one. But when God called a person to speak on God's behalf, it was hard not to accept the call. The voice and the visions were compelling because they were always a restatement of the deepest commitments and promises that Israel had received from God. They were God's deepest desire for the thriving of the human community: that people would honor God above all other powers and treat one another with justice and equity so that peace and prosperity could be enjoyed by everyone.

The recorded message of Amos comes to us from the 8th Century before the Christian era. Israel was by this time divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. They were surrounded by six other nation states, similar in size and power. They shared ethnic ties with some of these neighbors. In this period Israel and Judah were both relatively strong in relation to these neighbors. At times they created alliances with their neighbors to defend themselves against the larger nations of Egypt and Assyria.

Despite their military strength and relative prosperity, all was not well in the kingdoms of Israel. Amos was called to speak into the social and political sickness of the day. We get just a glimpse of his message in our reading this morning, but it reveals a situation that is not unfamiliar to us. God points out an incongruity: the people love to worship; religious activity is flourishing. Yet injustice is rampant.

Who was Amos and why might he have received this prophetic role? The opening verse describes him not by family line but by occupation: one of the shepherds of Tekoa. But the Hebrew word for *shepherd* in this verse is only found in one other occurrence in the Old Testament (2 Kings 3:4) and seems to indicate not a common shepherd but rather a "manager of sheep herds being raised for wool and meat." The author of the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* on Amos points out that "Later in the book, Amos describes himself as a mixed farmer, earning his living by caring for cattle, sheep, and tree fruit."¹

In today's parlance, Amos was likely an entrepreneur and a person with resources. If he sold wool and meat he no doubt traveled. He may well have been familiar with all of Israel's and Judah's neighboring countries. This would have made him an ideal candidate for a message that was directed not just at Israel and Judah but to all their neighbors as well. It would also mean that he would potentially have something to lose, that his acceptance of the role could put his livelihood at risk. For the word that he spoke directly attacked the ways that business was done. As with most prophetic messages, the visions that Amos saw and communicated included judgement and foreboding. They named the sins and excesses of the day, things that we are still all too familiar with: slave trade, greed, violence, cruelty, vengeful hostility, extortion, oppression, sexual abuse, injustice, and rejecting God's law.² We could say that Amos was an international whistle blower for God.

But the words of judgement that Amos delivered carried a tone of lament not harsh enmity. God stands against evil actions but God does not want to ruthlessly destroy. Always there is an invitation to return: return to proper worship of God, return to proper actions toward others. "Seek good and not evil, that you may live...hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate." This is very doable! But we know all too well, as we survey our current national landscape, how easy it is for right worship and just action to become severed. We have

¹ Allen R Guenther, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Hosea, Amos*. Herald Press 1998, 237.

² *Ibid*, 243

witnessed how a wide swath of American Christianity has embraced a national leader who does not base his actions upon principles of justice and compassion toward humans or the natural environment.

Of course, it's always easiest to see how a challenging message applies to others. But today *we* are reading this text and God, through Amos, addresses *us*. Perhaps some of us, in our spheres of influence, are called, like Amos, to take risks and speak truth even when it is not popular. To speak truth on behalf of others who may not have a voice or the power to raise it. Discerning this truth is not always easy. Darrell Martin took an unpopular stand during a strike that many of his colleagues did not understand. I'm sure there are other cases where individuals among us have felt in a quandary, where no option seemed ideal, where no pure justice was to be had. Here we can take courage in God's command, through Amos, to "*Seek good and not evil.*" We may not find the perfect outcome, but we can always stay committed to seeking the good.

Amos wielded a strong critique of worship—at least the way it was happening in Israel and Judah. God rejected worship that was not paired with just actions in other aspects of communal life. God rejected worship that became co-mingled with cultural practices that diminished people's reliance on God's sovereignty and, at worst, included sexual exploitation. As I reflected on this passage in the wake of yet another mass shooting, this time in a house of worship last Sunday, and listened this week to the national debate about whether the offer of prayers is an adequate response, I thought of a modern Amos in our own community. A couple years ago, Rev. Nancy Nord Bense, a Lutheran minister was growing angry. After conducting a sixth funeral for someone who had died from gun violence (most of these cases were suicides that might have been prevented if a gun wasn't handy), Nancy decided she could no longer stay in the pulpit. She left her pastorate to become the executive director of Protect Minnesota, a state-based gun violence prevention organization that "defends the inalienable rights of all Americans to life, liberty from the threat of gun violence, and the pursuit of happiness in safe communities."³ Nancy traded the pulpit for the legislative hearing room where she testifies on behalf of common-sense legislation to deter gun violence. She did not lead her congregation away from the church, and I expect that she still regularly worships, but she does invite church members to take an active role in this scourge of gun violence and the injustice of the corporate gun lobby that grips our country. Her work challenges Christians to consider: In whom do we trust for our ultimate defense?

Coming to worship can never be an escape from a messy world nor a substitute for getting involved in the mess. Ideally, worship reinforces the heart and essence of what God desires from us and builds our resolve to be conduits and servants of the grace that we have received and that we receive anew each time we come together. Rather than doing away with worship in service of justice alone, I believe our worship can strengthen us *for* the work of justice. It does this as we offer ourselves in worship to the One who loves justice. It does this as we recall the acts of God in history and recommit ourselves to entering, each time we leave this place, the steam of justice.

That image of justice as an ever-flowing stream is a wonderful source of hope. Water is persistent and it finds a way even when attempts are made to thwart its path. Perhaps you've all heard by now the story of the stormy night earlier this fall when we had torrential rain. Some people happened to be in the church for a meeting that night and Carol Wise had stayed late in the Brethren Mennonite Council office. Carol noticed water seeping from a Sunday school room into the hallway. When the trustees and I got the news, we knew the source of the water: the flat education roof has a drain that sometimes becomes clogged with leaves. When the water can't go down the drain, it pools and penetrates—finds its own drain. As had happened on a previous occasion, it found its way into the classroom closet, then into the hallway, and across to the nursery. Thanks to Matthew Hendricks, who came out and scaled a ladder to the roof in the dark of night, and cleaned the debris from the drain, the water returned to its intended route and the internal seepage stopped. But the image remains as a reminder for us: water finds its way. God invites us to be part of God's stream of justice. Let us continue to enter the ever-flowing stream.

³ <https://protectmn.org/membership-registration/>