

Damned by Worship

Amos 4:1-5 Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!" ² The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness: The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. ³ Through breaches in the wall you shall leave, each one straight ahead; and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the LORD. ⁴ Come to Bethel-- and transgress; to Gilgal-- and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; ⁵ bring a thank offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel! says the Lord GOD.

Matthew 25:41-45 Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

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Last week we began to become acquainted with the prophet Amos – and the book that bears his name. Amos was a shepherd whose life was suddenly interrupted by God. He was sent from his country of Judah up north to the nation of Israel. There he delivered God's message to the people of Israel. Today, we'll examine that message.

The book of Amos is short, about ten pages long and divided into nine chapters. Almost every chapter has some details about how Israel is offending God. As we saw last week, even though God is upset with all of Israel's neighbors for the brutality of their international relationships, Israel is rebuked for its internal behavior.

Part of our reading today is from the fourth chapter of Amos where God declares, "⁴ Come to Bethel-- and transgress; to Gilgal-- and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; ⁵ bring a thank offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them; for so you love to do." These words are dripping with sarcasm. Bethel was where the temple was in Israel. God says, "Come to Bethel and sin! Come sacrifice every morning, bring your tithes every three days, bring extra offerings, and make sure people notice when you do it." Why is God upset? Shouldn't God be glad that these people are setting a good example with their frequent attendance at worship and their generous offerings? The sarcasm reveals that one problem is that the people at worship aren't there to worship God so much as they are there to be seen as devoutly religious. They proclaim their freewill offerings. They make sure others know how generous they are. They publish their giving so that people will be impressed. All the while, they're eager for the worship service to be over -- and they can't wait for the Sabbath to end so that they can go back to buying and selling and making money. What's more, they cheat their customer by using undersized vessels for measuring the goods they sell, claiming a higher than correct value for the silver coins they use to purchase goods, and use deceptive tricks with false balance scales. They even hide the floor sweepings in the wheat to increase its bulk and weight. They can't wait to go out and cheat people. No wonder Amos refers to them as "those who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land."¹

In addition, the Israelites mistreat religious leaders. Nazirites were people who had set themselves apart by taking stringent vows, including refraining from alcohol, but they were forced to drink wine. Prophets, those who preached God's message, were told to shut up.² It was no wonder that part of God's word to the Israelites was, "I hate your festivals and worship services. I reject your

offerings. I won't even listen to your worship music."³ What God "rejects is worship without the active practicing of considerate justice."⁴ Worship had become empty, an event to be attended, not an opportunity to turn one's attention to God in worship. "Genuine worship reflects and reinforces an active faithful life of doing justice."⁵ Worship isn't limited to Sunday. "Worship continues in what we do at the office on Monday and continues throughout the week. This God does not want just our 'heart' or our 'soul.' This God wants all of us."⁶

They come to the temple, not to worship God, but to be admired, to be worshipped by others – and they are damned by their worship. They come to the temple, but are eager to return to their business, preferring money making to worshipping – and they are damned by their worship. They confine their relationship with God to the worship hour, and leave to cheat and defraud others – and they are damned by their worship.

The temple wasn't the only place where greed and deceit had corrupted things. In those days, between the inner and outer walls of a city, at a city gate, there was a square where court was held. Here, there were witnesses who could affirm contracts, and judges who could make rulings. But Amos says that those at the court hated people who tried to blow the whistle on corrupt business dealings. They didn't want the truth to come out. And they'd impose unjust fines and levies to fill their own pockets so that they could build fine houses and plant pleasant vineyards. They took bribes and ruled against the innocent. They ignored the claims of the poor. They turned justice into bitterness and stomped on the lives of the righteous people among them.⁷

Throughout all of the comments about worship and the legal system, there's a constant concern over the situation of the poor, the needy, the powerless folks at the bottom of society. It was a culture that was quick to enslave its own people because of the profit involved. The process was without pity. The poor were sold into slavery for even a very small debt, the price of a pair of sandals, sold because of the high price that the sale of a slave brought. There was no compassion, no mercy, no consideration of the circumstances or the misery involved. Failure to repay even a small debt could quickly turn you into a slave, not to your creditor, but sold off to some stranger. A small debt on your part could reap large profits for your creditor. Now, according to the Law of Moses, if a peasant borrowed money and used his cloak as collateral, the cloak had to be returned to him each night, because that was also his blanket. The principle here is that the debtor was to be treated with consideration for his circumstances. But Amos accused them of taking cloaks as collateral and using them as a ground cloth as they lay eating in the temple.⁸

Amos criticizes the idle rich who lounge around on opulent beds made with ivory, wiling away the hours with casual music. While the common person couldn't afford to eat meat, their diet included a lot of choice, tender, meat – and they drank not cups, but whole bowls, of wine. But the problem of their idleness and rich lifestyle isn't so much their wealth, as it is their don't-give-a-hoot attitude about the corruption and suffering in their land.⁹

It's especially noteworthy that in that ancient male-dominated patriarchal society, Amos has a word from God directed to the women, and he doesn't cut them any slack. "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan!" I don't know of any woman who wants to be called a cow – and I'm pretty sure women felt the same back then. Then, having gotten their undivided attention, Amos goes on to declare that they oppress the poor and crush the needy. He characterizes their lives as lying about, telling their husbands to bring them a drink!¹⁰ He won't let them use the excuse that they don't know how the common folk live. They can't just claim that they don't know anything about their husbands' business dealings. Ignorance is no excuse. God won't buy it! I wonder if this part of Amos is where Charles Dickens got the germ of an idea for a scene in *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge tells Marley's ghost that he always was a good man of business. Marley roars back, "Mankind was my business!" But by having ignored mankind, Marley is doomed – and so are the idle rich, men and women alike, who ignore the suffering all around them.

Amos has only a few major themes. One is that worship must be about worshipping God. When worship becomes something to do for recognition, when it becomes a routine formality done for the sake of appearances, and when we leave God in the sanctuary to go conduct our lives free of any Godly influence, devoid of compassion or mercy, then we are damned by our worship. It's a façade, a mask, a false pretense – and God will not be used for our petty purposes!

Another theme is that God cares about fair judgments, about consistency in legal decisions – no matter whether those who stand before the bar are rich or poor, friend or stranger. And those judgments that favor the rich over the poor are especially despicable in God's sight.

Woven through all of this, and repeated in so many ways, is concern for the poor. Amos cries out about the actions of individuals – and God holds the entire nation responsible. We would be well served if we read God's message delivered by Amos before each and every time we step up to a voting machine to cast our votes for government officials, bond issues, or government policies. We should always ask ourselves, will my vote make this nation more fair in its laws? Will my vote relieve suffering or increase it? God cares deeply about our decision.

Our concern for fairness and our concern for those who suffer isn't just an issue when we're in a position to influence governmental policies and actions. It is imperative that those concerns are a part of our daily life. We're to walk the path of faith seven days a week.

This past week I've been considering my preaching style. I've realized that I tend to try to describe the broad themes of our relationship with God and with each other. I'm afraid, if I point to specific applications of God's word and will, that it will confine the message and keep us from seeing all the ways that the lessons can apply in our lives. But perhaps that isn't effective preaching. I thought that the sermon last week clearly pointed out how deeply concerned God is for the plight of the poor and suffering who live among us. And I tried to tell how much it pains God when we ignore people who suffer. So it seemed ironic, more than that, I feel that I failed you, when, in the congregational meeting last Sunday, the issue of concern about the budget was not that we had cut money from the budget for aiding the hungry, the homeless, and the sick, but that the focus was on the desire to increase my pay. I'm not hungry. I'm not homeless. I'm honored that you seem to like me and I hope you have some idea of how much I love this congregation. But I hope you will not increase my pay on the back of those who need our help. Amos tells me that's not a good idea -- and I hope you, too, hear that word from Amos. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

God cares about all people and so must we.

God expects us to treat the less fortunate with compassion.

As followers and disciples, we are held to a high standard of love and justice.

¹ Amos 8:4-6 NRS ⁴ Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵ saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶ buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

² Amos 2:12 NRS But you made the nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, "You shall not prophesy."

³ Amos 5:21-23 NRS 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.

⁴ Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Old Testament* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007) p

⁵ Ronald J. Allen and Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Old Testament* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007) p 113

⁶ William H. Willimon, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 248

⁷ Amos 5:10-12 NRS 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, . . . you have planted pleasant vineyards . . . how great are your sins-- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

Amos 5:7 NRS Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

⁸ Amos 2:6-8 NRS . . . hey sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals-- ⁷ they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; ⁸ they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed.

⁹ Amos 6:4-6 NRS Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; ⁵ who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; ⁶ who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

¹⁰ Amos 4:1 Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!"