

Amos 5:18–24 (NRSV)

Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!

Why do you want the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, not light;

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.

Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

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.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Beware Shallow Faith

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: November 9, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Amos 5:18–24

These were the best of times. They are sometimes called the Silver Age of Israel. Not since David and Solomon's empire had broken apart had things been so good.

Israel and Judah had split apart, to be sure. But both kingdoms prospered in this period. Both enjoyed unusually stable parallel kingships. In a closely overlapping period, Jeroboam II ruled for forty years in Israel in the north and Uzziah for fifty years in Judah in the south. The two kingdoms enjoyed good relations with each other. For nearly half a century both kingdoms had single rulers living at peace with one another. At the same time, Uzziah and Jeroboam II greatly expanded their territories, so the kingdoms together approached the size of David's empire. Both kingdoms experienced incredible prosperity during this period, as well. The archaeological evidence points to magnificent and lavish building projects in both.

The opulence of the era was matched only by the fervent religious life, filled with pomp and ritual. In both north and south worship was lavish and opulent. In short, there may never have been before or since an era when Israel and Judah felt as good about themselves as they did in the first half of the eighth century BCE. It could be rightly said that, "all signs pointed to God's unlimited beneficial favor. His protection was assumed to be unconditional, and thus [Israel and Judah] felt totally secure in the present and thoroughly confident in their future."¹

It is into this seeming Shangri-La that the prophet Amos storms with a message apparently utterly out of tune with the feel-good era in which he lived. Shalom Paul and Frank Cross, the Biblical commentators hint at the reason for Amos's disillusion: "This geographical expansion, accompanied by thriving commerce and trade, resulted in an affluent society composed of a small, wealthy upper class."²

In this extended quote Cross and Paul perfectly capture Amos's message.

Blinded by their boundless optimism, which was posited on false premises, they were oblivious to the clouds of wrath and recompense swiftly gathering all about them. Amos, however, a keen and acute observer of their *modus vivendi*, was not bedazzled or beguiled by the economic, political, or religious state of affairs. He was well aware of the burrowing worm of decay and corruption that was undermining the society's ethical and moral foundations. He constantly and consistently called the upper class to task for their bribery and extortion, for their corruption of the judiciary, for perversion and dishonesty, for injustice and immorality, for exploitation of the impoverished and underprivileged, for resolute dissolute behavior, for pampered prosperity and boisterous banquetry, for greed and arrogant security, for self-

¹ Shalom M. Paul and Frank Moore Cross, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 2.

² Shalom M. Paul and Frank Moore Cross, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 2.

indulgence and a life of carpe diem, and for pride and prejudice. He unremittingly threatened that terminal consumption would undermine their conspicuous consumption. According to Amos, the wealthy minority who practiced a careless life style, who could not care less for the poor majority (6:6) and who took advantage of the plight of the poor to advance their own selfish ends were actually accelerating the Day of the Lord, which paradoxically would be one of ‘darkness and not light’”³

Wow! According to Amos, “Because the foundations of the society were corrupt at the core, the nation was doomed to an impending and imminent calamitous catastrophe.”⁴ At verse twelve of chapter four, Amos cries, “[P]repare to meet your God, O Israel!”

Amos never relents. He doesn’t speak of forgiveness. Grace is not in his vocabulary. Amos has one recipe for salvation, “[L]et justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The word Amos uses for justice is a specifically legal term (*mishpat*). Amos takes aim at the courts of law that distort their judgments to favor the rich and powerful minority. The word he uses for righteousness (*tsedaqah*) also has legal force and relates to honesty, fairness and mercy. Amos does not pull any punches. The system is rigged all the way to the high courts. The common people are run over by a stampede of unjust judgments, dishonesty and heartless treatment. Unless those things change, Amos says, the day of the Lord will come, and that day will be a far cry from what the self-satisfied residents of Judah and Israel expect.

Amos’s words fell on deaf ears, however. He disappeared from the scene around 750 BCE. Jeroboam II and Uzziah were still reigning in full splendor. The lavish lifestyles continued unabated. The territories were still expanding. No one listened to Amos, and then he disappeared. To be honest, he must have seemed like a fool whistling into the wind. Not one thing he warned these thriving countries of showed any sign of happening. When he disappeared from the scene no day of reckoning had occurred, and none appeared on the horizon, either. Amos must have seemed like an out-of-touch do-gooder. He was so utterly naïve that he actually thought people were supposed to do what they learned in Sunday school. And he thought God would strike if they didn’t change their ways.

Well, long after Amos had disappeared, long after Jeroboam and Uzziah’s reigns had faded into history, many years down the road the fissures and fractures in Israel and Judah did come. First the North, then much later the South crumbled and fell to foreign armies. Once again Israel and Judah were reduced to insignificance. Readers of Amos and advocates for justice can say that the day of the Lord did finally come, even if it was delayed. Prophets of yesteryear and prophets of today can look to Amos as a model to demand that they be listened to or else.

*** I have to confess that I’m worried as a preacher about embracing the doom-saying of self-confident prophets like Amos. First of all, even with the benefit of hindsight, it’s more than a little arrogant to point to the moral deficits in ancient Israel and Judah, or other cultures, and say that those moral failures explain their demise. Assyria and Babylon conquered Israel and Judah, and Assyrian and Babylonian cultures were hardly paragons of virtue. They were as brutal

³ Shalom M. Paul and Frank Moore Cross, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 2.

⁴ Shalom M. Paul and Frank Moore Cross, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 3.

and unjust as any other ancient societies. If the main thrust of Amos is that justice will prevail and injustice will fail, and that is his point, he's hard-pressed to explain the success of Assyria and Babylon. Reading moral causality into the rise and fall of powers is probably a fool's errand.

There are other reasons to beware of being a modern-day Amos. I've told some of you about the sermon I gave after my first semester in divinity school. Home for Christmas, my head filled with my Introduction to the Old Testament course, I gave my hometown congregation a seventeen minute romp through the history of ancient Israel. Following the reasoning delineated in the prophets and the historical books, I outlined Israel's many failures in the sight of God, and God's punishment against Israel, especially and finally at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. After the sermon, while shaking hands with the congregation, one man approached and thanked me for the sermon. He said understanding why ancient Israel was punished helped him finally understand why the Holocaust happened. My jaw dropped. I started to say, "That's not what I said." But then I realized that was just what I had said. Once you start explaining suffering and defeat as God's righteous punishment, it's a very slippery slope. It devolves rather quickly into blaming the victims in the story and saying that the powerful and violent are God's instruments of justice.

Prophetically preaching doom has at least one other failing, too. It too easily feeds our own desire for revenge. Prophecies of doom allow preachers to self-righteously rail in anger against those with whom they disagree or dislike and to claim that they are virtuously speaking for God. I think we need to be very cautious about ratifying our anger against perceived injustices and our desire for vengeance as God's will. As Jesus says in Matthew, we may do well to notice the log in our own eye before we scream about the speck in someone else's eye.

*** Nonetheless, Amos is a haunting presence whose message cannot be simply dismissed as self-righteous indignation. Amos identified flaws in his society that went to the very core of things. These failings were especially insidious because many people in his society saw them not as flaws but as signs of God's favor—the wealth of a few on the backs of the many or an all too smug perception that success was sign of God's approval. And it is hard to read Amos's diagnosis of his society and not hear an uncomfortable echo in our own. It is hard to hear Amos speak of unjust legal systems and not think of the racial demographic of our prison populations or the Supreme Court's decision that corporations are people and can buy elections. It is hard to hear Amos speak of the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few and not think of the growing disparity between the many have-nots and the few haves in our own society. It is hard to hear Amos decry the assumption that wealth and power are signs from God and not think of the rhetoric of takers and makers or the assumption that poverty is a sign of personal undeserving in our society or to wonder why tax welfare for corporations is okay but not for the poor. And it is hard to hear Amos's painful forecast that this wantonness will ultimately have serious consequences and not think that in our time these same ills are severely corrosive of the common good and future of our society.

I won't pretend to be able to read the tea leaves. And even if I could, even if I could see how the rise and fall of nations will occur over the next decades and centuries, I would be arrogant think I could assign the causes. But I do stand here today apprehensive and not a little sad that Amos's diagnosis of his society and his proposed treatment plan seem to gain no better hearing today than they did then. I cannot help but believe that whatever the future holds, it would hold much better if we would but "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Amen.