

AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL
TRAMPLED
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Amos 1:1-2, 2:6-16

The Old Testament book of Amos opens with this introduction, *The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel.* We know Amos as one of the great prophets of Scripture. In his day job, however, he was a shepherd who lived in the village of Tekoa. Tekoa was about nine miles south of Jerusalem. Scholars have determined that Amos' prophetic activity lasted only about year sometime around 760 BC.

Following his introduction, Amos then quotes the lyrics of a hymn. These lyrics set the tone for the rest of the book and foreshadow that Amos' message is NOT going to be rainbows and unicorns. It is going to be scathing. The hymn goes like this: *[Yahweh] roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.* Amos wants us to know that God is angry—God's voice roars and everything from the low-lying pastures to the top of the mountains dry up and wither.

This man Amos is a prophet. A prophet is not someone who divines the future—they are not fortune tellers; a prophet speaks the word of God. A prophet utters the uncomfortable words that people do not want to hear. The prophet speaks God's thorny truth to people trapped in sin. A prophet might be a priest but that is not a requirement. Amos was not a priest and proud of that. He boasted that he was just a farmer sent by God to declare God's word to the people of Israel.

Two-hundred and fifty years before Amos, in the year 1000, David was king over Israel. Tragically, just 70 years after King David died, the kingdom of Israel split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The capital of Israel was Samaria and the capital of Judah was Jerusalem. It is somewhat perplexing that God sent Amos from Judah in the south to prophesy in Israel in the north.

Our reading for today comes from the first two chapters of the book of Amos. In these two chapters we discover eight oracles—proclamations of judgment against eight different nations. These nations are the Aramaeans, the Philistines, the people of Tyre, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Judaeans, and the Israelites. Each oracle against each nation follows the same pattern. Each begins, *Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of (name the nation) [Moab, or Edom, or Judah] and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.* In other words, because of the sinful actions of each of these nations, God will bring punishment upon them.

In each oracle, Amos list the transgressions of that nation. Most of these are horrific acts of war—destroying entire populations, taking slaves, killing kings, breaking treaties. After each transgression, God proclaims, *I will send fire* on that nation and bring judgment upon them. Their actions were severe and God's punishment will match.

What is interesting about these oracles is not just their message but their geography. If you plot each of these nations on a map you will see that they encircle Israel. In fact, they seem to spiral in on Israel as if to warn that God's judgment is moving closer and closer.

The next to last oracle concerns the kingdom of Judah. The transgressions of Judah are that the people have *rejected the law of the Lord, they have not kept God's statutes*. Because Judah and Israel are related, this becomes a clue as to the sins of Israel—rejecting God's holy law.

Finally, the oracle concerning Israel is the longest and most detailed of the eight. The others have been warm-up acts. The oracle against Israel sticks to the formula—*Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke the punishment*. Then Amos lists the transgressions of Israel.

Their first offence is this: *They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals*. In this charge, Amos is bringing an indictment against the creditors who sell debtors into slavery. Israel had a mechanism for dealing with those who became so hopelessly mired in debt that there was no way for them to dig out. The mechanics of debt slavery was that the indebted person could sell themselves (or a family member) into slavery for a period of years—usually 7—to absolve their debt. This sounds harsh to us, but it was a form of bankruptcy law that allowed the indebted person an alternative to being stuck in debt forever. Amos is condemning the Israelites for abusing this law in various ways and taking advantage of the poor and vulnerable for economic gain.

The intent of the law was that the person in debt would be sold to the one they were in debt to. There would be a relationship. The debtor knew who he or she was working for; they knew the purpose of the arrangement. However, by the time of Amos, there were now brokers who would purchase existing debts and then sell the debtors to third parties—not unlike how debt collectors work today. Essentially, the debtor was reduced to being a commodity. They were dehumanized. They became an asset to be bought and sold. Any relationship was destroyed. A mechanism for financial mercy had become a means of slavery. Those who engage in these practices, proclaims Amos, *trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth*.

Notice that Amos stipulates that it is the *righteous* that are sold for silver. To be righteous also means innocent. In court, the man who is 'right' should be vindicated. But that is not happening. One of the themes we will encounter throughout this

book is the corruption of the courts. The wealthy manipulated the legal process to exploit the poor and enslave them for profit.

In this oracle against Israel, Amos' second charge indicts sexual practices which dishonor women and prey on the helpless.

Third, Amos condemns those who take the clothing of the poor as collateral. A poor person may not have anything but the clothes on their back and an unethical creditor would take even that. These creditors would then display their piety by attending worship in the temple and using the clothes of the poor as their pew cushions. It's not hard to grasp why Amos rails against this hypocrisy.

And finally, Amos impugns those who bring to worship the wine they purchased with money they extracted from the poor.

These are but a few of the sins of Israel's wealthy and powerful people. This is not the last Amos has to say on the subject. In future weeks, we will encounter the full spectrum of Amos' condemnation of Israel. Amos' indictment is that the wealthy and powerful of Israel have sinned against God by the way they victimize the vulnerable—the poor, women, those in debt.

Amos reminds Israel that it was God who brought their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt and gave them this land. Then, so that the people would not go astray, God lifted up priests and prophets. But the people corrupted the priests and silenced the prophets.

Because of their sins, God promises punishment. God will drive them into the earth. No one shall escape God's wrath.

While the other nations around Israel have sinned, Amos views the sins of Israel as a far more grievous guilt because of what they do to their own people. Furthermore, for all intents and purposes, these actions—while technically legal—are corrosive to the spirit of the law. The Israelites have a historical relationship with God that the other nations do not have. Amos holds Israel to a higher standard than the rest—a standard of justice for all.

It has now been twenty-one days since George Floyd died while in police custody. On May 25th, Floyd, an African-American, was detained in Minneapolis for allegedly passing a \$20 counterfeit bill. We've all seen the videos. We've watched how one policeman held Floyd's legs. Another knelt on Floyd's neck despite Floyd saying that he could not breathe. Bystanders can be heard on the video begging the officers to let the man up. Eventually, as we watch, Floyd loses consciousness. Medical personnel arrive and transport Floyd to the hospital where he was pronounced dead. That officer knelt on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

News of this death and the accompanying video ignited a wave of protests first in Minneapolis and then across the country and even across the world. Protests have been held in all 50 states with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets.

What is it that fuels these ongoing protests? It is generations of pent-up anger and frustration. It is a sense that injustice pervades the fabric open our nation—an injustice based on systemic racism. The statistics are sobering. Various studies of criminal justice data show that African Americans are far more likely than whites to be pulled over by police, and are as much as three times more likely to be searched. White people make up about 60% of the overall population of this country. Black people make up about 13%.

Despite there being four times as many whites as blacks, according to study published by the National Academy of Sciences, in the past five years, black men were about 2.5 times more likely than white men to be killed by police, and black women were 1.4 more times likely than white women to be killed by police.¹

Black people are disproportionately more likely² to come in contact with the criminal legal system, whether that's being stopped by police,³ arrested,⁴ detained,⁵ or incarcerated.⁶ These disparities are not accounted for by individual behavior differences. For example, although black people use and sell drugs at approximately the same rates as white people, they are more than twice⁷ as likely to be arrested for drug-related offenses.⁸

If you watched any of the protests you may have noticed that the crowds skewed towards a younger demographic with whites and blacks participating. A recent poll shows that among Americans age 18 to 29 years old:

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/floyds-death-spurs-question-what-is-a-black-life-worth/2020/06/12/17501b3c-acc1-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d_story.html

² <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305414>

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0858-1>

⁴ <https://stanford.app.box.com/v/Data-for-Change>

⁵ https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1745-9125.12047?fbclid=IwAR3Co50DMsIXHC1b7rwkwBNWgkRtPa08zfDar6uRR32lwirGVwDMkuJpXmk&casa_token=Y2X6dl6DuB8AAAAA%3AMtVCoMeeMJGGRraxhiH_RCuNnyD2XPsb32sQe9oUlpvGMarca1CAq_rGD003MLsN1pH9vQjgBkOb

⁶ https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1745-9125.12047?fbclid=IwAR3Co50DMsIXHC1b7rwkwBNWgkRtPa08zfDar6uRR32lwirGVwDMkuJpXmk&casa_token=Y2X6dl6DuB8AAAAA%3AMtVCoMeeMJGGRraxhiH_RCuNnyD2XPsb32sQe9oUlpvGMarca1CAq_rGD003MLsN1pH9vQjgBkOb

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4899119/>

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/11/george-floyds-killing-was-just-spark-heres-what-really-made-protests-explode/>

- 82 percent of them support these protests
- 77 percent of them see the killing of George Floyd as a sign of broader problems in police treatment of black people
- 83 percent say police need to keep making changes to treat blacks equally to whites.⁹ Young people clearly desire change.

Over these weeks, I have begun to regard these protestors less as a nuisance and more as prophets. Or possibly the entire protest movement is itself a prophet. It articulates the unspeakable truth; it demands change. It brings to light the injustices that too many Americans experience every day.

You may watch the protests and ask what's the purpose, what are they trying to accomplish marching in the streets like this. The purpose is to raise awareness, to get people talking. And it is working. I'm talking to you right now. As a pastor, I am compelled to respond to these voices all around us that challenge us to open our eyes to racism's cruel injustice, voices that are not unlike the voice of Amos calling for justice for the poor and marginalized. When Amos denounces those who *sell the needy for a pair of sandals*, is that any different than people protesting the death of a man over \$20. When Amos denounces those who *trampled the head of the poor into the dust of the earth* is that any different than people protesting how an officer of the law kneeled on the neck of George Floyd forcing his head into the dust of the street?

Amos is a prophet with a powerful message—a message that refuses to fade as long as injustice is free to rear its head in this world.

Amen.

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/12/young-peoples-attitudes-towards-protests-should-worry-republicans/>