

AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL
CHOSEN
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Amos 3:1-2, 13-15

During the 19th century, the people of Tennessee were subject to a range of disease outbreaks—especially cholera, smallpox, and dysentery. For the residents of West Tennessee, particularly Memphis, the greatest epidemiological threat came from Yellow Fever. Yellow Fever is an especially horrific disease which causes high fever, chills, hemorrhaging, severe pains, and yellowing of the skin. Victims of Yellow Fever vomit up a black substance composed of blood and stomach acids.

Yellow Fever doesn't spread from person to person. It is transmitted by mosquitoes—a fact not discovered until 1900. Infected sailors on ships from the Caribbean and West Africa would dock in ports such as New Orleans. Mosquitos would then spread the infection to the local population. From New Orleans, river traffic carried the disease up the Mississippi to Memphis. The only reprieve would come with winter's first mosquito-killing frost.

The city of Memphis suffered outbreaks of Yellow Fever in 1828, 1855, and 1867. The worst, however, would appear in the 1870s. In 1873, 2000 Memphians died from Yellow Fever. At the time, that was the highest number of deaths for any inland U.S. city. But that was nothing compared to 1878.

In 1878, Memphis experienced a mild winter, a long spring, and a hot, wet summer—in other words, mosquito heaven. The first death from Yellow Fever was reported on August 13. Memphians remembered the epidemic of 1873 and so they fled. Within two weeks, over 25,000 people left the city. Some mid-south towns had already instituted lockdowns and refused admission to anyone from Memphis. Hardest hit were the towns along the various railroad lines leading out of the city—Germantown, Moscow, Collierville, Paris, Brownsville, Martin, and Lagrange. These communities experienced staggering losses. The epidemic so eviscerated the Memphis population and economy that in 1879, the state legislature revoked the city's charter.¹ For a while, Memphis ceased to exist.

It is understandable why people would flee the city when faced with Yellow Fever's imminent anguish. But the reality is that the ones who left are the ones with means—they had a place to go. The poor—those with no options—were stuck in the city. This raises the complicated ethical question of is in times like this is it right for people to leave? When the epidemic hits, should it be “every man for

¹¹ <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/yellow-fever-epidemics/>

himself” or do folk have an obligation to stay and help others? Are the privileged special or should they be held accountable?

Our reading today brings us the words of the Old Testament prophet Amos. Amos brought the word of God to the Kingdom of Israel in the 7th century BC. At this point in history, Israel was experiencing enviable prosperity. Through military conquest, they had expanded their territories. Economically, they had never been stronger. However, this prosperity was not designated for everyone, and as the affluent gained more wealth, those at the bottom were pushed further down.

Amos arrives in Israel with a scathing message towards those who subjugate the poor for their own profits, for those who trample the weak, for those who abuse the vulnerable.

In our reading, Amos declares, *Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt.* Amos reminds them that it was God who delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. And this God tells Israel, *You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.* God reminds Israel that, yes, they are special. They are the only people that God has known. The Hebrew word for know means more than ‘to be an acquaintance.’ It implies intimacy. It means to ‘know well,’ ‘to have an ideal relationship with.’ And with these people of Israel, God has developed a kinship, a bond.

And it is precisely because of this relationship that God intends to punish the Israelites for their sins. Why? Because God holds them accountable for their actions. When they sin, God doesn’t turn a blind eye. Instead, God says to them, “Didn’t I raise you better than this?” Through the words of Amos, we can hear God’s anger. The lion has roared.

There is a certain joy with being God’s chosen. There is a freedom in knowing that when you call, God will answer. But there is also the risk of arrogance. One of the drawbacks of being God's chosen is the temptation to assume that the chosen must be more worthy than others—and beyond God's judgment. The arrogant begin to believe that their power and wealth are a result of their own doings—that they are exceptional, that other people are less worthy. Eventually, the arrogant even stop listening even to God.

Back in Memphis in 1878, was it right for the privileged to evacuate from the city? Staying behind could mean death. Was it wrong to leave, or was it wrong to abandon those who couldn’t leave.

When the coronavirus first hit in the U.S., I remember reading several articles about how the wealthy were fleeing from their city homes to their vacation homes in the Hamptons, Telluride, Aspen, Saint Barts, and other enclaves. Some went to live

on their yachts. However, they discovered that they were just creating new hotspots of infected millionaires.

Privilege demands accountability. The privileged of Israel were not privileged because they were rich, they were privileged because of their relationship with God. *I brought you out of Egypt. You only have I known of all the families of the earth.* Their accountability to God is greater than that of other nations. They are chosen. They should know what God requires of them. They can't claim ignorance. Scripture is clear. After their freedom from Egypt, while the Israelites were wondering across the wilderness, God spoke to them saying, *If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation* (Exodus 19:1-6) For the privilege of being God's chosen, God required that their lives reflect this. With the privilege of knowing God comes the responsibility of acting like the people of God.

Those who are arrogant have a way of denying responsibility for their actions. They say things like, "I can't see that my playing with matches has anything to do with my house burning down." "I don't see that years of denying jobs to people who don't look like me is a reason for them to protest against my company." The arrogant believe that what they do is always right and they stop acting like the people of God.

Amos points out that God's judgment is a consequence of the people's sin. The arrogant ask why is this happening to me? The answer is clear. You have sinned.

God promises punishment on those who have sinned. There will be no place to escape, no place to flee. Amos repeats God's warning to Israel: *I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end.* Even the wealthy with their vacation houses will have no place to go. Their opulent, ivory-lined mansions will not spare them from God's judgment.

Back in Memphis during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878, it would be incorrect to say that all the privileged fled the city. They didn't. Many chose to stay and care for the sick and look after the city. Many of them died because of this decision.

The Howard Association was a benevolence organization founded in New Orleans during the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1837.² The Howard Association provided support and medical care for the sick during epidemics. Chapters sprung up in southern cities afflicted by Yellow Fever as the need arose—Memphis included.

²² https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1665&context=gradschool_disstheses

The Howard Association in Memphis organized a medical corps to help the devastated population. Volunteer nurses and doctors came from all over the country to treat the thousands of disease victims. Many of them stayed at the Peabody Hotel, the only hotel to remain open during the outbreak. Each physician was assigned a district where they made rounds, often starting at dawn. At night, they gathered at the hotel to compare notes as they sought to understand this disease. Of the 110 doctors who tended to the sick in 1878, 33 of them died of Yellow Fever. The members of the Howard Associations called themselves “Howards.”³

Rabbi Max Samfield was such a “Howard.” In 1878, this Memphis rabbi attended to the sick and perform numerous burials of people of all races and religions.

Dr. R. H. Tate was the first African American physician to practice in Memphis. He was recruited by the Howard Association from Cincinnati. He died in Memphis of Yellow Fever.

Father Joseph Kelly helped evacuate orphans out of the plagued city.

A group of Episcopal nuns known as the Martyrs of Memphis tended to the sick. They died as well.

Then, there was Annie Cook, a “professional” woman who transformed her “establishment” into a Yellow Fever hospital. She too died from the disease. They called her the Mary Magdalene of Memphis.

These are only a few of the many people who did not flee but answered the calling to serve those in need.⁴ They were chosen. They were holy.

The prophet Amos left his home in Judah in order to travel to Israel and deliver to the chosen a warning of God’s anger and God’s impending judgment. The chosen must be held accountable.

As Christians, we consider ourselves members of God’s chosen family. You know these words from the book of 1 Peter: *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...* (1 Peter 2:9). As believers in God and followers of Christ, we are to accept our calling, and to do so with humility. We are not to brag that we are Christians. We are not to consider ourselves superior. As we read in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, *As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience* (Col 3:12). And then there are these words of Jesus, *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart* (Matthew 11:29).

³ <https://www.wknofm.org/post/howard-association>

⁴ <https://historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/yellow-fever/yellow-fever.html>

The subject of Christian humility is a sermon topic on its own. But I will remind you today that as Christians we are called to be humble, not arrogant, servants, not masters, compassionate, not prideful.

In Memphis in 1878, those who chose to remain did not flee the hell they knew was coming, but rushed in to save lives. Our savior did the same when he went to hell so that we would not have to.

I want to conclude with one more story about Yellow Fever. There was a Howard Association chapter founded in Norfolk, Virginia, during that city's Yellow Fever outbreak of 1855. A significant number of volunteers from the Gulf Coast—especially from Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana—journeyed to Norfolk to offer their assistance. In their report about the outbreak, the Howard Association stated their appreciation to all the volunteers writing: “Nor can we find words to express our thanks to the city of New Orleans, for the noble and generous manner in which she responded to our call for help. No sooner had our appeal gone forth, than skillful physicians and experienced nurses rushed to our aid. Being the first to volunteer assistance, they were among the last to leave.” That was 1855.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi. The Norfolk Foundation (the successor of Norfolk's Howard Association) send a check for \$50,000 to Baton Rouge for relief efforts. An article in the Norfolk newspaper noted that this money was sent as a partial repayment for a 150-year-old act of kindness from the Gulf States.⁵

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Association