

AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL
CLAMOR
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Amos 4:1-13

I feel like I owe you an apology. There is so much going on in our lives right now and it is trying our souls. Foremost, there is the COVID-19 crisis that doesn't seem to want to go away. We assumed we would have it under control by now, but it is only getting worse. Cases are spiking around the country. The institutions that we have long counted on to guide us in times like this appear to be adrift. We find ourselves stuck in a miasma of uncertainty. Every plan we make must have a contingency. Many of you haven't seen loved ones in months—parents in nursing homes or retirement communities, daughters who are pregnant, grandchildren with compromised immune systems. Because we want to protect these people, we can't be with them. Across our nation, we are told that 127,000 people have already died from this virus. This week, the CDC speculated that the number of infected people in the country may be 10 times higher than current numbers suggest.¹

And then there is the economic fallout from our efforts to stem the spread of the virus. Over 30 million Americans are unemployed, countless businesses have closed, friends have been furloughed, some of you have lost your jobs. We've watched the value of our retirements accounts plummet. We are conflicted between protecting the economy and the physical health of our neighbors.

In addition, there is the wave of massive civil unrest birthing protests in every corner of our nation. These protests are forcing us to reevaluate our nation's deeply held attitudes and actions toward race.

If that is not enough, we learned this week that there is a giant African dust storm headed our way from the Sahara Desert. In reality, this dust storm is normal and harmless, but in the wake of everything else, it just sounds bad. 2020 will be the year without sports, concerts, new movies, or the Wilson County Fair.

And this is where I feel I need to apologize. With all that is going on, with all that is weighing down our souls, I decided that this summer was the time to preach a series of sermons from the book of Amos.

I feel like a better pastor would have chosen more appropriate texts—texts that are uplifting, filled with hope, that highlight God's good works, verses that reassure us that all will be well, that will get through this. Isn't that what we need now? I should offer readings such as this from the Song of Songs: *How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is*

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/06/25/coronavirus-cases-10-times-larger/>

like a flock of goats descending from the hills of Gilead. Or from this morning's Call to Worship: Happy are the people who know the festal shout! Or from Psalm 150: Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens... Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. But no, I had to go and choose Amos. It's like you are drowning and I throw you an anvil.

Amos is the 7th century BC prophet who traveled to Israel to preach God's promise of judgment against a people who have grievously sinned. So far, Amos has not offered us any word that seems hopeful, any word that offers comfort—just God's promise to send fire on the transgressors, to destroy their cities, to crush the people. If you hoped that today's passage would bring us a rainbow, well, you will be disappointed. Today's reading takes us to an even darker place. Today's reading is an anvil.

In the first three chapters of this book, Amos has provided us with a list of indictments against the wealthy and powerful of Israel. Amos tells us how these people have trampled the rights of the innocent, how they sell the needy for a pair of sandals, how they find the poor person who has next to nothing and take even that. They build their wealth on the backs of the vulnerable. They oppress. They bring *violence and robbery*.

This list of indictments continues in chapter 4. In the first of three sections in this chapter, Amos rails against the rich, self-indulgent women who inhabit the city of Samaria—the capital city of Israel. In a most unflattering image, he refers to them as the *cows of Bashan*. I don't believe that he's impugning their appearance but rather condemning their lifestyle. Bashan was a high plateau just outside Israel known for its lush pastures. Animals raised there were legendary for their quality. A cow of Bashan would spend its day grazing a smorgasbord of foliage, never needing to search for its food. All they had to do was eat and sleep.

The wealthy women of Samaria spent their days like these cows. They were absorbed in self-indulgence, calling out to their husbands, *bring something to drink*. They can afford this lifestyle because, as Amos tells us, they have *oppressed the poor, and crushed the needy*. Amos promises that God will judge them. He writes, *The time is surely coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks*. Yes, that is the terrible fate that Amos declares, that these people will be dragged away with hooks.

The second section of chapter 4 concerns worship. To put it briefly, Amos condemns the wealthy for their hypocritical worship. They act righteous and are oblivious to their sins. They offer exorbitant sacrifices to God to impress everyone with their inflated piety. God is not impressed.

The third section of chapter 4 is the part I read earlier. This section is likely the weightiest anvil that Amos will throw at us.

This section begins with five statements outlining five disasters that God has (or will) visit upon the people of Israel. Each of these statements concludes with this refrain: *yet you did not return to me, says the Lord*. This refrain gives this section the feel of a worship liturgy. It is like a confession of sin.

In the first of these five statements, God says, *I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities*. Now that may sound like God is your dental hygienist scraping tartar from under your gums, but that is not it at all. *Cleanness of teeth* is an ancient Hebrew idiom for 'being hungry.' Let's say a friend asks if you want dinner. If you are hungry, you respond, "You bet. My teeth are clean." Literally, this means there are no food particles left from the last time you ate. It's been so long since your meal that your teeth are clean. What God is saying is, *I brought hunger and a scarcity of food on your people. Yet you did not return to me*. This is the first statement.

In the rest of these five statements, God tells the people, *I withhold the rains and ruined your harvest, yet you did not return to me. I sent blight and disease on your crops, yet you did not return to me. I sent pestilence on your people, yet you did not return to me. I sent invading armies to overthrow your people, yet you did not return to me*.

We read these statements and the question that comes to mind is 'why?' Why does God do these things? Why does God send hunger and drought and famine and disease and invasions to Israel? Was this as punishment for the sins of the people? For an answer to this, we need to turn to the book of Leviticus.

The book of Leviticus is one of the first five books of scripture. For the people of Amos' day, this was their bible. They would be familiar with its message.

In the book of Leviticus in chapter 26, God says, *If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you rich crops, security, peace, safety. I will look with favor upon you and give you many children. I will walk among you and will be your God and you shall be my people*. The promise here is that God will bless those who are faithful.

But Leviticus continues and God says, *If you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, then I will bring terror upon you—disease, failed crops, broken communities, and more*. And God doesn't stop there. *If you continue to be hostile to me, I will continue to plague you seven-fold for your sins. Wild animals shall attack your children and your livestock. I will decrease the numbers of your people*. God paints this dreadful picture of death and destruction if the people continue their hostility toward God.

The good news is that God concludes by saying, *But if [you] confess [your] iniquities... then I will remember my covenant*.

Covenant. This is the key to understanding what we hear in Amos. God made a covenant with Israel and God deeply desires to maintain that covenant. But a covenant is not possible if the people turn their backs to God in sin. God calls but the people don't listen. So, to get their attention, God sends destruction. Remember the plagues that God sent on Egypt. The purpose of those plagues was not to punish the Egyptians; the plagues were meant to gain the attention of the pharaoh. *Let my people go*. God is clamoring to make the people listen, and change. In Leviticus, all God asks is that the people confess their sins and turn back to the relationship with God. *If [you] confess [your] iniquities... then I will remember my covenant*. According to Amos, God sent hunger and drought and disease and then laments, *yet you did not return to me*. How tragic is it that the people ignored God as they pursued their own self-indulgence?

And then we read these ominous words of the prophet, *Prepare to meet your God, oh Israel*. Prepare to meet your God. The lion has roared.

Our reading concludes with the words of an ancient hymn—words that remind us of who God is: *For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—Yahweh, the God of hosts, is his name!* This is not any god. This is not Baal; this is not Asherah. This is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one who delivered the ancestors from Egypt. This is the God who loves his people, who maintains the covenant with them. This is the God who goes to extraordinary lengths to recover the lost.

I still feel that I need to apologize to you for afflicting you with these dire words of Amos. But on the other hand, these may be the best words that we can hear right now. Maybe, in this time when we do feel beaten down and despondent by the affairs of this world, that we are more receptive to God's word. Did God send the COVID plague to punish us? I don't know. But should we respond to this plague as an opportunity to ask 'What exactly is God saying to us?' God should not have to clamor for our attention. As the prophet Elijah discovered, the voice of God can be found in *sheer silence*. But maybe we live in a time when God needs to shout to get our attention. We should listen.