

AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL
FAÇADE
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Amos 5:21-27

Catherine the Great ruled Russia from 1762 to 1796—34 years. She is Russia's longest-ruling female leader. Catherine came to power following a coup d'état which she orchestrated in which she overthrew Emperor Peter III—her husband.¹ One can only imagine Thanksgiving in that household.

In 1787, 25 years into her rule, Catherine chose to take a six-month tour² to inspect her country's newly acquired territories. This included the Crimea which Russia had just gained as a result of their victorious wars against the Ottoman Empire.

This half-year-long trip was arranged by the region's Governor General, a man named Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin.³ Potemkin had been placed in this position by Catherine with whom he was extremely close. Potemkin wanted to impress the Empress with the work he had accomplished in the region, so in preparation for her visit and tour, he did something unusual. He constructed fake villages—portable, painted facades of village buildings. Then, as Catherine and her entourage floated down the Dnieper River on their royal barge, she would see these beautiful villages filled with happy, dancing villagers. After the barge passed by, the village would be quickly dismantled and then reassembled further along the empress's route. The villagers were of course just actors and would move with the village. The ruse of this fake village came to be known as a Potemkin Village.⁴

The phrase continues in our language today. A Potemkin Village is something created that is intentionally fake that is designed to deceive and impress someone. Potemkin used these villages to do just that—to deceive and impress the empress.

2600 years earlier, if the prophet Amos had possessed this phrase, I am confident that we would find it in our reading for today. A Potemkin Village would describe exactly what Amos is decrying in his powerful oracle against the people of Israel.

In the year 750 BC, the Kingdom of Israel was doing well. Militarily, they were secure from their enemies. They had recently expanded their territory through conquest. Because of this growth, wealth was pouring into the nation. The affluent

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_the_Great

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crimean_journey_of_Catherine_the_Great

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grigory_Potemkin

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potemkin_village

and the powerful were living ‘high on the hog.’ It is into this situation that Amos arrives with his message denouncing the lifestyles of Israel’s rich and famous.

Amos was not a professional, full-time prophet. He was a shepherd and a farmer from the village of Tekoa. Tekoa was located in the southern kingdom of Judah—a separate country from Israel. Amos felt the call of God to travel north to Israel’s capital city, Samaria, and deliver God's word to the people there.

In Israel, Amos presents a long list of indictments against the wealthy and powerful of the kingdom. Amos does not see Israel as a nation reveling in prosperity. Rather, he sees a country awash in rot and decay. Amos spotlights the bribery of judges, the abuse of the poor, religious practices that are shallow and meaningless, people that have grown self-indulgent and self-dealing. Amos condemns these people for rejecting God and God's laws.

However, despite all their sin and corruption, these people continue to attend the sanctuaries to worship God. They observe the Jewish festivals and holy days. They bring opulent offerings and sacrifices. They sing and play music. And yet despite all this, God cries out, *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

Amos speaks the word of God telling the people that they may offer God their burnt offerings, they may fill God’s house with grain, but God will reject it all. They may bring to God their finest animals—maybe the calf that won a blue ribbon at the fair, that fat, sleek calf that would produce valuable offspring. “Bring that calf before me,” says God, “and I won’t even look at it. And I don't want to hear the noise of your songs or the clanging of your instruments.” God does not want to have anything to do with these people’s worship.

So, the question is why? Why does God not want anything to do with their worship? To answer that question, we have to ponder another question. And that question is, What is worship? And that itself is a pertinent question for us today in our COVID captivity unable to worship in the means to which we are accustomed, unable to worship in the manner that this congregation has worshiped since 1910—gathering together on Sunday morning in one space, singing, reading scripture, and praising God.

Worship is that time when we set aside the distractions of our lives and focus solely on our relationship with our Lord. When I say that, you are probably ahead of me already reciting God’s commandment to *remember the Sabbath and keep it holy*. But that Command is only the last in a string of Commandments regarding worship. The commandments begin with the first one which says *I am Yahweh your God*. If we are going to worship God then we must remember who God is. The Commandments continue with, *You shall not worship any other gods ahead of me* including little carved images of gods or anything else you might be tempted to

worship or put before Yahweh. The next commandment is *Do not call upon my name unless you mean it*. And finally, there is the one that instructs us to *remember the Sabbath*. These Commandments make it clear that we should keep God foremost in our lives. Worship is when we do that.

So, back to our question of why does God reject the worship of the Israelites? After all, aren't they observing the Sabbath as God commands? Aren't they bringing their generous offerings to God? So, what is wrong?

The issue is that despite these actions, the people of Israel do not live lives that are disconnected from God. They have other gods before the Lord—gods of greed and self-indulgence. They worship objects of luxury; they speak God's name with their lips but not their hearts; their Sabbath is never holy because God is not in it. Their worship is a Potemkin Village. It is a painted façade designed to mislead their God.

Because of their lives of corruption and abuse, because of the way they treat the vulnerable, because of the way they hurt people, God has no use for their worship. Their gifts and offerings are worthless, their songs are discordant to God's ears. Their attempts at worship are meaningless because these people have turned from their Lord. Their worship is empty because their lives are full of greed and corruption and lies. Their act of worship is not what God desires.

The thing that God does desire from us is a relationship. God does not yearn for fancy gifts; God aches for the intimacy and trust that is found in a close relationship—a relationship where we put God first in our lives. When we make God first, we can't help but experience the world differently. When we make God first, we see the world through a godly lens. And as a result, we treat others in a godly manner—with love, respect, and justice. That is all that God wanted from the people of Israel.

What kind of worship does God truly desire? Amos provides the answer. True worship is found when justice and righteousness prevail. Listen to the timeless words of the prophet: *Let justice roll down like waters, let righteousness run like an ever-flowing stream*. True worship is found when God's justice washes across our world like a mighty river.

Back to the Potemkin Village. There is a tremendous irony to this story about Grigory Potemkin constructing these fake villages. The story itself appears to be a fake. Although the notion of Potemkin Villages has been around for centuries, it is a myth. Historians today believe that the Potemkin Villages never actually existed. What historians do believe happened is that Potemkin did indeed spruce up a few villages and even added fake buildings. But this plan was not to deceive the Empress but rather to help her visualize how these war-torn communities might be

improved with some royal investment. Potemkin was trying to assist the villages by bringing the Empress a vision.

The legend of the Potemkin Village was likely part of a smear campaign created by those in the royal court who wished to discredit Grigory Potemkin.

Potemkin's true goal was to help the Empress understand his vision for this land. This goal is one that is relevant to the church today.

When our congregation collects food, we are well aware that our efforts are not going to eliminate hunger. When we house a few people for an evening, we recognize that we are not going to eradicate homelessness. Yes, we do help a few people, and that is good. But what we also accomplish is that in these acts of compassion we are creating a vision for others to see, a demonstration of God's reality and God's kingdom in our world.

Our actions as a church are the painted facades of justice. That is not to say that they are fake; they are very real. They are the face of what could be. Our acts of care and compassion for our neighbors are holy expressions of justice. These acts are reflections of God. These acts are worship that is pleasing to God.

Our job, as the church, is to put forth a vision of how the world might be, to be the eyes of hope for those unable to see. We want nothing more than for the world to witness justice rolling across our land. When we accomplish this then everyday becomes a Sabbath, every day is holy, every day is worship.