

Amos 8:1 – 12

July 17, 2022

Sermon: Rev. Kennedy

One day, Amos, minding his own business – “a dresser of sycamore trees” – heard the voice of the Lord: “Amos, get up this horse and ride and this horse’s name is Prophet of Almighty God.” Of all the prophets, I have aspired to be like Amos. Truth be told, I have wanted to be Amos: troublemaker.

Amos was not a horticulturist. Not a landscape architect. He was a fruit picker. A sycamore in Palestine was a poor man’s fig tree and produced a fig that was inferior to the other figs. Today Amos would be a migrant fruit picker. He may have been a civil rights leader and a labor organizer like Caesar Chavez. Now, we understand why he made trouble. Kings, potentates, royal houses, the nobility, the rich, the famous, the affluent did not like Amos. He made them nervous.

Set the scene: A congregation sits in worship on the Sabbath and listens to Amos preach. This is a Sabbath scene. In Exodus 20, Sabbath relates to creation and is ordained into the very structure of created reality. Rest belongs to the shape of faithful life. To rest on the 7th day is the most godlike activity of which we are capable. In other words, a nap is a godly behavior. A spiritual experience. A nap every day is a mini-Sabbath. Of course I’m in favor of this definition because I take a nap every day.

Amos claims that the people were making a mockery of Sabbath. “You can’t steal from the poor and show up here and pretend to worship God,” he says. The king’s lapdog preacher declares: “Get out of town and preach elsewhere!”

Amos insists that Sabbath is an **economic principle**. Economic exploitation of the poor is not supposed to happen. The Sabbath is the great equalizer, for that day is a foretaste of the kingdom when all – rich and poor – are reckoned to be exactly equal. All – masters and slaves – are to GIVE IT A REST. America could use a Sabbath. Give it a rest! All our fighting and political machinations – give it a rest. All our lies and deceits – give it a rest. All our trampling on the truth – give it a rest. America needs a Sabbath.

Amos spares no one’s feelings. Listen to these harsh words:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

If Amos is right, and I certainly think he is, the validity of our worship depends upon our attitude and actions toward the poor. Worship is not about the praise songs but about the treatment of the poor. Amos can't tolerate his congregation worshiping God, singing praises, offering prayers but thinking of stealing, lying, and cheating.

There is not supposed to be any difference between our worship and our service. Listen, to Amos talk about worship in chapter 5: "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 everflowing stream." I believe that the amount of praise singing on Sunday morning, in some churches up to 40 minutes can be used as a cover for not doing the social justice work the singing, praising church is supposed to be doing. Look at the word again: Let's spell it out plain: God hates bad worship; God loves justice and righteousness. Praise singing does not cover for ignoring the poor, the immigrant, the underserved. The more praise singing in your church, probably the less social justice.

God hates bad worship. Quite the indictment. This is not a matter of taste. It is not a matter of what people like or don't like. The superficial ways that we judge worship are not at play here. Worship is far more than an event that people like or love, an experience that people find exciting or boring.

Now, centuries later – same people of God, same Sabbath, same disparity between worship and service. Amos' congregation is determined to take from the poor of whom they are also afraid. Look, we are scared. Not only are we afraid there will not be enough for us; we are afraid of the poor. We are fearful there will not be enough if we really care for the poor. Middle class Americans are in a great depression, a theological depression rooted in fear of scarcity. If we share food, shelter, health care, there may not be enough for us. "In our fear, we practice greed against neighbor: guarding what we have, seeking more, seeking advantage. We need to have our way and our truth and our life and our church. We are in the midst of a great depression among Christians – alienated, angry, having hurt and being hurt.

Sabbath is advance notice that the kingdom of God will not forever allow this economic reality to stand. **GOD WILL NOT ALLOW THE DISPROPORTION TO CONTINUE FOREVER.** Heaven is coming to earth one day and our culture, the culture of disproportion, will come to an end. Some have too much. Some have too little. Disproportion! We have a winner take almost all society. I am shocked at the ferocity with which we defend this rampant **Marketism** – the evil twin of a failed Marxism. We have a Major League Baseball economy – the winners get richer and the losers get poorer. Sabbath, Jubilee, Jesus – these are the signs that the restless, greedy children of disproportion are coming to an end.

God's people are an experienced bunch. We have learned how to deflect God's harsh truths. Somehow, we have managed to postpone Jubilee for thousands of years. All these Christians pray for the rapture, a fictional event that will never happen, but they will not cross the street to help start the first Jubilee in history. Jubilee is when poor people get their stuff back. A step

toward Jubilee would be when the ancestors of slaves receive reparations. And why is the cause of reparations being led by secular colleges and not by churches?

When American Christians don't wish to be reminded of our nation's flawed history – slavery, mistreatment of Native Americans, segregation – they do not rush to confess or repent or ask forgiveness. They deny the truth. They write revised versions of history and tell people that they don't want their children to be shamed. If we don't like the truth, we change the truth to something that we like. I think this is what it means that a famine of hearing the words of the Lord to fall upon us like rain from the sky.

Amos insists that our fear and anxiety while sitting in church means we are no longer capable of hearing the word of God. “The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.” A people who deprive the poor of food experience a famine of God's word. There is a relationship between the hunger in the belly of poor people and the hunger for the word of God in the mind of affluent people. What irony. The less we do to help the hungry starving for food, the more we hunger for the word of God which we have rejected. The more we take from the poor, the more God takes from us the Word of Truth.

Now, Amos says that God hates this kind of worship. God hates worship divorced from social justice. Hate. Unfortunately, hate is big in America today. There's a lot of hatred of our fellow Christians. People loathe, despise, and hate one another. We shouldn't be surprised. Hate makes appearances all through the Bible. Cain hated Abel and killed. Esau hated his brother Jacob, and there were strong reasons for being angry at Jacob. He was a scoundrel, a cheat, and a liar.

The brothers of Joseph hated him. There was so much hatred among the brothers in this family that twice the text says, “They hated him even more.” Absalom hated his brother Amnon. Sometimes we don't have to be in the streets or at a protest to find hatred. Sometimes hatred breeds in our families. When Jesus insists that we love our enemies, it turns out that some of our enemies are members of our own family.

Sometimes people hate the prophets. Nobody really likes prophets. No one knows what to do with them. If Amos moved into your neighborhood, the value of your homes would depreciate. If a prophet attends your cocktail party, people will either avoid him or patronize him. Nobody likes a prophet. Look at the shoddy treatment Amos received. “Amaziah [the king's court preacher] said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.” There's a conversation between two kings recorded in the Bible: “The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, ‘There is still one other by whom we may inquire of the Lord,

Micaiah son of Imlah, but I **hate** him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me but only disaster.”

So, there's a lot of hate in the Bible. Yet we hesitate to say that God hates because we know God loves. It feels like dangerous territory when we say that God hates. I went digging in the Bible to find out about God hating. I discovered that God hates idolatry. We think we are home free because we don't have any idols in our homes – no fancy little gods made of sticks and stones. How naïve! Idols come in all sizes, shapes, and forms. Idolatry is whatever matters more to us than God and the worship of God. I think bad worship and ignoring the Sabbath has to do with idolatry. And God hates idolatry.

Amos has told us that God hates bad worship. We should tread lightly here. Yet Isaiah echoes Amos: “New moon and Sabbath appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.” One prophet may be chalked up as a kook, but two prophets mean we have a problem.

Isaiah takes it to another level. He tells us what real worship looks like: “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: If your sins are like scarlet, will they become like snow? If they are red like crimson, will they become like wool? If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land, but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” If you want to have good worship, godly worship, holy worship, you will have to work at it. You will have to activate something more than your emotions, your tastes, and your likes. You will have to engage in sweat and toil and struggle and pain. Good worship involves some pain to the heart and to the head. You will have to think and when necessary, change your mind. That's the meaning of repentance.

If we get the worship right, we will see justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” God calls us to worship: confession, praise, peace, redemption, repentance, proclamation, and holy communion. If we worship God rightly, we will no longer hate our brothers and sisters. We will no longer oppress the poor or act in greedy ways. We will flock to the house of God and say that it is a good and right thing to give praise to almighty God. We will ascend the holy hill to Zion, proclaiming praise and producing justice and righteousness. Remember, God loves great worship. God loves participating in worship with his hard-working worshipping people. God loves when we are alive with the possibility, the urgent desire to share in the sacrament of holy communion with one another. God loves good worship. Start there and the justice and righteousness will follow.