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Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24

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Sermon and Scripture

On August 28, 1963, more than a quarter million people participated in the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, gathering near the Lincoln Memorial where Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech. Probably one of the most often studied and quoted of Rev. Dr. King’s speeches, the “I Have a Dream” speech was an acknowledgement that, though all people were created equal, equality was not the reality for Black Americans. Rev. Dr. King insisted in the speech that anything less than that would not be acceptable for the future of his children, for the future of the nation. That was his dream and, while progress has been made, it is important to acknowledge that there is still much work to do.

This is part of Rev. Dr. King’s speech that day,

“We cannot walk alone, and as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights: “When will you be satisfied?” We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We can not be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating “For Whites Only.” We cannot be satisfied so long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

“Until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a might stream.” As eloquent as Rev. Dr. King was, these particular words were not original to him. They belong to an ancient prophet named Amos who lived in the 8th century BCE, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Before I read today’s text which is from the

book of Amos, I want to connect it to the story of the prophet Elijah whom we talked about last week.

As we discussed, Elijah worked in the northern kingdom of Israel, attempting to bring the king, and therefore the nation, back to being faithful to and honoring their covenant with God. Remember at the end of the 1 Kings text we read last week, we heard the story of how God spoke to Elijah in the silence on the mountain. God told him to go back and anoint a new king in Syria, and then a new king in Israel, and finally a new prophet to carry-on the work Elijah had started. Elijah did that. The prophet he anointed was Elisha, who became a successful prophet, speaking truth the community needed to hear. Elisha was pretty convincing and performed some cool miracles, but in spite of that, the kings persisted in their unfaithfulness, as kings will do.

With today's text, we shift gears a bit in our study of the Hebrew Bible. Up until this point, throughout the fall, we have been reading stories primarily. In the prophetic writings, we find oracles, hymn fragments, and sayings. Through these writings we can see how Amos and the other prophets pursued the hearts of kings and elites who benefited from the injustice and corruption present, while the ordinary people suffered.

With that, this is Amos 1:1-2 and Amos 5:14-15 and 21-24:

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, two years before the earthquake.

²And he said:

The Lord roars from Zion,

and utters his voice from Jerusalem;

the pastures of the shepherds wither,

and the top of Carmel dries up.

Seek good and not evil,

that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,

just as you have said.

¹⁵Hate evil and love good,

and establish justice in the gate;

it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² 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.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

When Amos was prophesying, Israel was enjoying a time of relative peacefulness, which generally meant prosperity in the ancient world. Amos wrote before the Assyrians became a serious threat to the nation. You would think that if the country was not being threatened or torn apart by war, if the men were home working instead of off fighting, if people weren't surrounded by death and destruction, life would be good for everyone. Unfortunately, that was not the case for many of the people in Israel in the mid-8th century. In Amos 1:2, we read that God roars like an angry lion---and the sound of God's voice speaking rage and judgement has an adverse effect on the environment as the shepherd's pastures wither and the top of Mt. Carmel dries up. It is as if the earth was grieving because of the ways in which human beings are treating other human beings. Throughout the book of Amos, that is the chief problem and the behavior trying to be corrected.

Later, in chapter 5, the prophet continues his admonishment with the command to "seek good and not evil that you may live," and he equates God's presence with the people's ability to treat each other equitably, to create and maintain a just society. When justice is present, God draws near. Knowing we need all the help we can get; the prophet provided a concrete example of what it means to "hate evil and love good," by suggesting that a good place to start would be by making sure there is justice at the gate. In ancient Israel, city gates were places of central activity. It was at the city gates that important business transactions were made, court was convened, and public announcements were heralded. Sadly, the

gate was the place where the most vulnerable people, the ones with nobody to represent them, were particularly susceptible to injustice.

That ought to sound a bit familiar to us for data shows that the ones in our court system who cannot afford to pay for representation do not fair as well as people who have the means to pay an attorney. According to the Oklahoma Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, “Over 99% of the people on death row are indigent...Persons of all income levels commit murder, but poor people are the primary recipients of the death penalty.”¹ Here in Oklahoma, we can see this playing out in really horrifying ways as the state has resumed carrying out death penalty sentences, following a six-year pause in which the state was supposed to implement safeguards to make killing people more humane. The irony of that statement is staggering. Based on last month’s third consecutive botched execution, in which John Marion Grant convulsed and vomited as he died, we can assume the pause did not yield its desired results.

Despite all this, Oklahoma is pushing forward with its plan to execute six more people in the coming months. The ones the state succeeds in killing will, effectively, be human test subjects in that whatever pain they suffer in death will be collected as evidence in upcoming court battles that they will not be alive to participate in. If ever there was evil for people of faith to hate (to borrow Amos’ words), it is the state-sanctioned practice of killing people, a practice that disproportionately affects poor people and people of color, which is the very definition of injustice. You would think Christians would be making a lot of noise about this, but that is not the case.

According to a 2014 Public Religion Research poll, 59% of Evangelical Protestants surveyed prefer the use of the death penalty to life in prison, without the possibility of parole, as a sentence for people who are convicted of murder. Mainline Protestants don’t feel much differently with 52% preferring the death penalty to life imprisonment. In a surprise to literally no one, Black and Hispanic Protestants are far less likely to support the death penalty at 25% and 24% respectively.² Gee, I wonder why people of color can’t get on board with it?

¹ <https://okcadp.org/public-education/educational-resources/facts-about-the-death-penalty/>

² <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/facts-and-research/religious-statements/opinion-polls-death-penalty-support-and-religion>

We are thousands of years removed from Amos' day yet the world in which we live is still very much like Amos' ancient world when it comes to injustice and his indictment of us, as people of God, still applies. We don't always stand up for the ones who are vulnerable, or fight for justice for the ones who are being silenced, especially if they aren't right here where we can see them and know them. For people with significant privilege, at times injustice is out of our immediate sight and experience, so it ends up out of our minds too. And we don't like it when we are confronted by that. I mean...we are good people. We go to church.

In the last 18 months, churches all over the world have been forced to figure out what being church really is. Traditionally, a lot of us have understood "church" as worship. And our measure of faithfulness is how often we come to worship and what we think of the worship-style. Amos' text does not say worship isn't important, but it does say that worship is a poor substitute for justice, "I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² 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.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps."

On other words, don't come to worship instead of dismantling systems of injustice, treating your neighbors with compassion, or sharing what you have with others. That's hypocrisy. And God doesn't like it. Neither do our neighbors who are watching us, some of whom have already been hurt by the church. I force myself to think about this every week. I pick out the main point of my sermon or the lyric that stands out to me in one of the songs we sing, and I ask myself, what would the person who called for help this week or the church member who came to me with a concern, think if they heard me saying or singing those words? Would they call me a hypocrite when they heard me sing, "You'll find love that's waiting here for you. There's a family reaching out for you, you'll find love outpoured..." To be clear, they would definitely say I can't carry a tune. But I hope they would also say that my actions reflect what I say I believe about God and human beings.

A couple weeks ago, the children in Worship and Wonder heard the story of Solomon building the Temple in Jerusalem. They learned that, in many ways, the Temple was like our church building. Each week, after the story is told, the children are invited to wonder about it. That day, the storyteller said, "I wonder what the people did inside the Temple." One child said, "I think they did things to help people in the community in the Temple." Friends, that's what our children think church is about! DCC is not a community of perfect people, but we are nailing it when it comes to teaching our young people about God and God's love.

Today's text ends with the words we began with, the words spoken by Rev. Dr. King in his "I Have a Dream Speech, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." For Amos' hearers, who lived in a world in which drought and the absence of rain was normal, the water imagery here must have been quite compelling. Unlike us, they did not turn on their faucets and get water. There were not an abundance of lakes and ponds from which to draw. There were community wells and dry riverbeds or streambeds that only contained water when there was a heavy rain. The kind of abundance that Amos talked about would have been nothing more than a dream or a miracle. But that miracle, should it happen, that dream should it come true, would have changed the lives of all the people, rich and poor, old and young, and everyone in between.

Amos compared this abundance with justice and righteousness. His point was not just that faithfulness leads to these things, but that just as everyone would benefit if water was abundant, everyone will benefit when justice prevails. And the opposite is true too; everyone is wounded by injustice, whether they are the oppressed or the oppressor. And those really are the only two choices. The ones who are oppressed are obviously wounded because they are kept on the outside and disproportionately affected by disease and flaws in the criminal justice, healthcare, and education systems. But the ones who maintain the status quo, the ones who are silent or who pretend they are neither oppressed or oppressor and the ones who actively participate in the injustice around us, they (we) are wounded too.

We are wounded because it keeps us from right relationships, with our neighbors and with God. We were not created to be distant from one another, to be above or below each other, to sit on the outside, looking in. We were created for love

and for community. Injustice robs all of us of beloved community. The King Center explains Beloved Community like this, “Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated...Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.”³ That is the world God dreams about. That is the world we are called to create.

Creating Beloved Community is work we can all do. It is work we are doing together. When we teach a child, through word and deed, that “church” is about serving others, we work toward Beloved Community. When we explain to our neighbor what it is for DCC to be open and affirming, we work toward Beloved Community. When we give our time and our talent and our money to our community partners and our shared ministry, we work toward Beloved Community.

Amos’ words are harsh, especially for people, like a lot of us, who see ourselves as very engaged in bringing about justice. But I hope we can also see his words as encouragement and hope. He calls for a radical shift in the way God’s people were living. This season of COVID has caused all of us to shift. We have been reminded that being “church” is not about gathering in the same place, at the same time on Sunday morning. We have been reminded that how we treat each other and how we share what we have are far more important than how we worship.

The lesson for churches in this pandemic has been that Sunday mornings are no longer the main event. But the truth is, corporate worship was never supposed to be the main event. It was supposed to be an outpouring of gratitude for our lives beyond these walls. It was supposed to remind us that we are not alone in our hope for a different world, and to inspire and equip us to live into who we were created to be. Worship is important, but it is not why we were created. We were created to take of the earth and to take care of each other. And when we fail to do that, our worship is the proverbial clanging gong to the One who created us.

So, the word of hope and encouragement, I think, is that while a lot has changed about our life together, maybe some of it has been change for the better. Maybe

³ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-beloved-community-dr_b_4583249

making it the norm for our family ministries programs to be outside when weather allows has been a good thing. Maybe giving the staff the freedom to work remotely has improved their work-life balance and that is a good thing. Maybe these masks have reminded us that sacrificing comfort for the sake of others is not a bad thing. Maybe the reminder that our real life together exists beyond the bricks of this building has been a good thing.

Whatever shape our lives take in the months to come, I am grateful to be learning, serving, worshiping and living life with you. Amen.