

Amos 5

Amos was a shepherd, not a professional prophet or priest like Jeremiah. Amos was not even from the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was from the town Tekoa which is in the Judean hill country south of Jerusalem. But God had called him to prophesy against the nations surrounding Israel and, more specifically, against Israel herself.

Amos arrives on the scene during one of the most prosperous periods of Jewish history. Israel is free from hostile enemies; the economy is sound; society is stable. But Amos can't help but see that within this outward peace there is a creeping rottenness at the core of society that will bring destruction in the end. He sees rampant cheating going on in business; judges being bribed in the courts; gross mistreatment of the poor; religion that has grown shallow and meaningless. He sees a people that have become self-indulgent and soft, and leaders who are increasingly corrupt. (Does this sound familiar?)

Back in 1934, William Foxwell Albright, dean of American archaeologists, dug up ancient Bethel, a village about twelve miles north of Jerusalem. He found a thriving Middle Bronze Age city, with a sanctuary made of stone. In the late Bronze Age, the place was destroyed by fire. But by the late 8th century, BCE, Bethel had recovered and was thriving. Albright found a palace, luxurious trinkets, signs of wealth. In those days, when Amos left Tekoa and stood up to preach in Bethel, the economy was booming. Worship attendance was up, the number of sacrifices on the

altars was on the upswing. Amos, was not a priest, just a guy, whose life God had interrupted as God erupted into his life. And so he invaded the complacent security of these upwardly mobile citizens of Bethel, the piety of those devout citizens who patted themselves on the back.

Amos, like all prophets, is an archaeologist of sorts. He digs into our souls. And we, like the citizens of Bethel, are a superficial people. We live right up on the surface of things; we can't see very deep; we dare not look very deep. That's one reason we avoid the Bible. As Martin Luther put it, reading the Bible is like undergoing surgery. There's something inside us that will kill us – but it's painful to have it removed.

Amos begs for their displeasure by speaking the truth, God's own words: *“I hate all your show and pretense — the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies ... Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.”* Evidently God is not very impressed by mere talk, by melodious hymns, by eloquent prayers. What God wants to hear and see is the constant flow of justice and righteousness.

What do we mean by justice? We tend to think that justice is when the good are rewarded, and the bad are punished. But in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*, means that the neediest in society are cared for. A just society takes care of those who are in any sort of need. An unjust society does not – does

not take care of its needy citizens. Let justice roll down like an ever-flowing stream!

Now we may say, Hey, we do good – now and then! No doubt when Amos spoke, the fine citizens of Bethel said, "Oh, come back in the Spring, during the rainy season. We do good sometimes!" Like us: at Christmas and Thanksgiving we buy meals for the homeless, a toy for a needy child, we might donate to the food bank, or drop off an old coat at a clothing drop. 'Tis the season!' We forget that the hungry are hungry in August. Children are children in April. Families get cold in February. We subscribe to what John Wesley called "the doctrine of the devil" – we do good when we feel like it.

Amos was a shepherd, expert at nosing out watering holes. The Israelite landscape has countless ravines, but very few rivers. Most of the ravines are the beds of what is called a wadi. When heavy rains come, the wadi flows. But in the dryer seasons, the wadi bed is bone dry. Amos knew well what it meant to lead his herd toward a ravine, and peek in to find out; is there any water? Is this a stream? Or another dry one? Another wadi? Let justice flow down like an ever-flowing stream – not like a wadi! Let justice, and righteousness, be constant, like the air we breathe. Like an ever-flowing stream.

Christ came, not so we could **feel** different, but so we could **be** different. Too much Christianity is a shallow exercise in feeling good. People visit a Church, and decide to go again because "I felt good there." Polls ask if we believe in God: a dizzying 98% say Yes. So why then is the world so fouled up? The sad truth is that

for most of us our faith is just pasted on. The real gods are money, pleasure, success, the next big deal. Faith gets tacked on to help us feel better in the midst of what we're up to, or we hope to co-opt God so we can get a boost toward what we're after, or we desperately need some sedative to allay our fear of death. But our spending, dressing, driving, play and conversation are strangely untouched by God.

As we read the Gospels, we might be struck by the utterly mundane, gritty practicality of what Jesus said and did. He was uninterested in whether you muttered formulas, got your doctrine straight, or how you feel. But he was keenly focussed on how you treat others, spend your money, or your attitudes toward life.

We do need to be saved – from a pointless life, from our exhaustion, from our self-righteousness, from our cynicism, from our hypocrisy. We need to be saved – to be the love of God – walking about and doing good. Amos erupts into our comfortable lives: *“Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.”* – yes, even in 2017. Compassion may be out of style these days. But, with God, compassion is always in; compassion is always the style for God's people. We need exemplars, heroes, people who are living it, as our models. Jesus was so deft at compassion. He touched lepers, ate with the outcasts, drank with Samaritans, washed his disciples' feet. If he were here today, he would be comforting and caring for all the tens of thousands of refugees in camps.

St. Francis of Assisi was a simple, creative man. Arriving at the village of

Gubbio, he found the city gates bolted shut, its citizens armed with knives and fierce looks. A wolf had been terrorizing the village, and had actually eaten several of its citizens. When a posse would venture up into the hills, the wolf would hide, or even devour one of his predators. Francis said "I must pay a visit to my brother the wolf." The citizens of Gubbio offered him weapons, but he climbed up into the hills unarmed. The citizens atop the city wall, watched what they were sure would be the end of him.

Sure enough, the wolf appeared, snarling, drooling, baring his fangs. Just as he approached Francis, the saint pulled out a cross from his pocket. The wolf sat down. Francis spoke, "Brother wolf, I hear that you have been a great sinner, that you have terrorized this village and have even eaten its inhabitants. This is a great sin against God! If you repent, you may be forgiven." The wolf stared down toward the ground. Francis continued: "But I think I know why you've eaten the citizens of Gubbio. There's no food up in these hills. You're really just hungry." The wolf looked up. Francis said, "I'll make you a deal. If you confess your sin, and if you promise not to terrorize these people, I will get them to feed you every day." Francis reached down and the wolf offered his paw in return.

At first the citizens were suspicious, on their guard. But after a time they began to trust the wolf. Brother wolf came in and out of their homes at his leisure. He was like a pet to them. Two years later, when he died, the citizens of Gubbio wept for days. The miracle of this story is not that the wolf became tame. Rather, the miracle is that the citizens of Gubbio became tame and caring.

Once Mother Teresa was invited to a hunger conference in Bombay. She lost her way, and arrived late. On the steps outside, she noticed a man, dying of hunger. Instead of going in, she took him, and fed him. Inside, they were talking about so much food supply in so many years, statistics here, statistics there – while a real person was dying on the steps outside. That's how we need to do it, one at a time, not just talking, but feeding, touching.

In a documentary on Mother Teresa's life, there was a great moment when a wealthy American woman found Mother Teresa. She whipped out her checkbook, and said, "I want to write you a check to support your work." Mother Teresa looked up, shook her head and said "No money."

"What?"

"No money."

"You won't take my money? I have a lot of money, this money can help you."

"No money."

"No money! Well then, what can I do?"

Mother Teresa smiled that inimitable smile, took her by the hand, and said, "Come and see." She led this woman deep into the barrios of Calcutta, searching, until finally she came upon a small, grimy child. Mother Teresa said, "Take care of her," and so the woman took a cloth, and bathed the little girl, took a spoon and fed

her. And later she reported that her life was changed.

Come and see. Come and touch someone. Let justice flow down like an ever-flowing stream.

When Mother Teresa came to the United States, she made a great speech in New York, in which she said, "You don't have to go to Calcutta to share in my work. Calcutta is wherever you are. Wherever you are, there are people who hurt, who need love. Find them. Love them. For in loving them, you love Jesus."

In the words of another Teresa, St. Teresa of Avila, from the 16th century: "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out on a hurting world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now."

Maybe this is the answer to a generation of skeptics for whom Christianity seems like so much nonsense. They need to see faith in action, in the flesh, taking on legs. The problem is not that Christianity had been tried and found wanting. The problem is, it has hardly ever been tried.

Theologian Marcus Borg shares his experience: On a recent plane trip, the woman sitting next to me said, "I'm much more interested in Buddhism and Sufism than I am in Christianity." When asked why, she said, "Because they're about a way of life, and Christianity is all about believing. I don't think beliefs matter nearly as

much as having a spiritual path and following a way.” I understood her comment, but silently disagreed with part of it.

To begin with the disagreement, Christianity **is** about a way of life, **a path**, and it has been from its very beginning. At the centre of Jesus’ own teaching is the notion of a “way” or a “path”, and the early Christian movement was known as “**The Way**”.

Yet the woman’s statement reflects the most common understanding of the word “faith” in modern Western Christianity: faith means holding a certain set of “beliefs” – “believing” a set of statements to be true, whether cast as biblical teachings, doctrines or dogma. Most people today, in the church and outside of it, take it for granted that Christian faith means believing a set of Christian beliefs to be true ... Yet the twin notions that being Christian is about “believing” in Christianity and that faith is about “belief” are a modern development of the last few hundred years.

Prior to the modern period, the most common Christian meanings of the word “faith” were not matters of the head, but matters of the heart. In the Bible and the Christian tradition, the “heart” is a metaphor for a deep level of the self, a level below our thinking, feeling, and willing – our intellect, emotions, and volition. The heart is deeper than our “head”, deeper than our conscious self and the ideas we have in our heads. Faith concerns this deeper level of the self. Faith is the way of the heart, not the way of the head.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, writer and teacher, tells about a class on Jewish

history he was teaching to teenagers in his congregation. The class was studying the holocaust, and as they read example after example of butchery and cruelty, Kushner would see the horror rising in his students, and feel their cumulative outrage approach the boiling point. That was when he asked them, "Why was Hitler wrong?"

The students were confused by the question. "What do you mean, why was Hitler wrong?" one student asked. "Do you mean he might have been right, that the Jews were an inferior race and should be murdered?" Another cried, "Why was he wrong? You can't just take people and kill them because you don't like them." Kushner continued: "Remember, the Nazis were careful to pass laws sanctioning everything that they did. It was all within the law. Was it still wrong?" "Of course it was," the first student replied. "Just because you pass laws permitting the gassing of children doesn't make it right." Kushner pressed further, "But why? Are you trying to tell me that some things are wrong, even if the majority of people think they are right? Are you telling me that there is such a thing as good and evil, some standards of morality that exist no matter how we feel about them, or whether or not we agree with them? Where do you get such an idea?"

Of course, Kushner knew where his students got that idea. They got it from their Biblical heritage, and especially from the prophets, like Amos. For the prophets assert that there is one God, and that by itself is a moral statement. Dostoevsky, the great Russian novelist, wrote the mournful line, "If there is no God, then everything is permitted."

If there is no God, then there are no ultimate standards of good and evil apart from human opinion. In that case, we are free, in the same way that a sailor at sea without a compass is free – we can choose to travel in any direction we wish, precisely because we have no way of knowing in which direction the harbour lies. If one of us, or a group of us, or a whole society of us, come to believe that torturing political prisoners or beating our children or pursuing self-interest at all costs is a good thing to do, or owning twenty guns or shooting children or worshippers or concert-goers for some misguided reason, religious beliefs, or disagreements is acceptable, then there is no higher authority to appeal to. That's just the way life is.

If there is a God, however, then there is such a thing as good and evil, whether human beings agree or not. If there is a righteous God, as the prophets say, then we cannot decide by majority vote that it is all right to steal or kill, any more than we can decide that winters should be hot or chocolate is more nutritious than vegetables (pity though that may be). If there is a God, then there is a moral foundation to this universe, and all our actions take on significance. In fact, it's this moral dimension which gives human life its dignity, and which can infuse even the humblest human life with meaning.

In the same book that Harold Kushner describes his dialogue with students about the Holocaust, he describes his grandfather, a house painter eking out a modest living. "But in addition," Kushner writes, "my grandfather had a secret identity. He was one of God's agents on earth, maintaining literacy in a sea of ignorance and kindness in a world of cruelty. His days, his every act, became

important because he believed it mattered to God what he ate, how he earned and spent money, how he respected his wife and treated his children. The sense of having to live up to God's standards redeemed my grandfather's life from anonymity and insignificance, and it can do the same for each of us."

If there is a God, then we are not like sailors lost at sea. There is a star to steer by; and there is a harbour toward which we are headed. We even know what that harbour will look like, thanks to the prophets. Here is where they rise most eloquently, holding up a vision of what God intends human life to become. They speak of the lion lying down with the lamb, of soldiers beating their swords into plowshares, of children growing up unafraid, of there being no sickness, or hunger, or crying anymore. Amos writes: "Seek good, and not evil, that you may live."

God is on the side of good, not evil – which not only redeems our present existence from insignificance, and infuses our daily decisions with meaning – but it also means that although we may not see it now, we can trust that justice will be done in the end.

In that simple message Amos shares, he gives hope – the stubborn hope of prophets that insists that life is worth living – that the meaning of our lives will be found in seeking and serving what is good. Even if evil is all around, even if the world should deny it, God is still God of this universe, and justice is still just.

Amen.