

The Big Picture

(#2 in Series of Amos)

I would invite you to go back in your mind's eye to the fall of 1940, the fateful period that Winston Churchill called Britain's "finest hour." Having subdued the Low Countries and France, Adolf Hitler now turned his attention to the last remaining democratic power in Europe. Hermann Göring convinced Hitler that Britain could be bludgeoned into submission on the cheap, so the *Luftwaffe* unleashed a fierce aerial blitz intended to break the British will to resist. Night after night, London burned. One of the most famous photographs from those desperate weeks was the nocturnal silhouette of St. Paul's Cathedral, its great dome standing strong and unshaken against the smoke and fire swirling through the City of London. The caption in the London Times on December 29th 1940 read "Standing up gloriously out of the flames and smoke of surrounding buildings, St. Paul's Cathedral is pictured during the great fire raid of Sunday". This grainy photograph stirs the emotions to this day, because it captures in one brilliant image the struggle of Western Civilization against the barbarism that seemed on the verge of overwhelming it. (Please go to <http://encyclozine.com/Image:StPaulsCathedral.jpg> if you would like to see this photograph).

I want you to fix this photograph in your mind because it can help us to understand that portion of the Bible called the Prophetic writings of the Old Testament. I want to suggest to you this morning that the Prophetic Books stand like St. Paul's Cathedral through the wrecks of time. They point us Godward when all around us human history is marked by death and destruction. They emphasize that there is a struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. And often the kingdoms of this world seem on the verge of overwhelming the kingdom of God.

The prophets are perhaps that portion of the Bible least preached. I have been ordained for seventeen and a half years and I have never preached on the prophets before because I find their message difficult to communicate. But they need to be heard. Why, you ask? Because without the prophetic voice we see international relations resting in the hands of the politicians, the industrialists and the military. The news is told every night as if God has nothing to do with influencing the destiny of nations. However the prophetic voice helps us to see through the smoke that God is here and at work in the world.

While it is true that St. Paul's stood though the bombings of London it did not do so undamaged. After a direct bomb hit on October 9, 1940 some of the beautiful mosaics on the ceiling of the cathedral had to be swept up from the floor and put back in place. Likewise God is not unmoved or unaffected by the pain, suffering and devastation caused by the evil machinations of the nations down through the corridors of time. Like St. Paul's during the bombings he is profoundly shaken.

We see this in the message of Amos, the prophetic book we are studying this Fall. Amos was a Hebrew prophet of the eighth century B.C. He was a shepherd living in Tekoa, a village about 15 kilometres south of Jerusalem, when God spoke to him in a vision. If you were here last week you will remember that the name Amos means "burdened." Amos' heart was heavily burdened for the cause of the LORD and the plight of the people. His name tells us something important about the prophetic ministry. It is a calling that grows out of a deep longing for God's will to be fulfilled in the lives of God's people. It also tells us something about God's heart. It is burdened because collectively we human beings have a propensity to live as if God wasn't there. The prophets, like Amos, tell us that when we do this it leads to untold human suffering.

In the passage I read this morning we hear Amos speaking to the nations that surrounded Israel and Judah, Time does not allow me to look at each of the judgements the Lord pronounces on Syria, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab. What I want to do is comment briefly on the structure of the passage and then look at verses 3-5 in more detail.

Beginning with verse 3 and continuing through 2:16, a series of eight threats of vengeance are set forth. (Please read Amos 1:3-2:16 before reading what follows) The first six are directed against Israel's neighbors, followed by one against Judah. The final threat is spoken against Israel, with whom the rest of the book is concerned. The eight predictions are in symmetrical stanzas, each introduced by the words, "Thus says the LORD." God starts by stating the sins of other nations, which Israel would have been happy to hear about. God is a universal judge and is concerned about warning other nations about coming judgment. Amos uses these prophecies to get the attention of his audience in Israel before announcing God's judgment on them. He then proceeds to show Israel her own sins of disobedience. The Lord wanted Israel to know that the impending judgments were foreordained by God and would not come about

by mere chance. Since the nations that did not know the truth of God were punished, his vengeance on Israel would be so much the greater.

You will notice that in each of the six pronouncements before you this morning is the repetition of the phrase for “three transgressions . . . and for four—“ This expression, found in all eight of the denunciations is called a graduated numerical saying. These are used within the Bible as a method of illustrating evil behavior (cf. Proverbs 6:16-19; 30:21-23;) This literary device shows that the nation in question had filled its cup to the full with sin and now judgment was inevitable. It also helps to bear in mind that seven in Scripture is an indefinite number, and is taken to express what is countless. By saying then, three and four transgressions, it is the same as if Amos had said seven. By using this method to enumerate the sins Amos is intimating that these countries had become so perverse in their transgressions that there was no hope of repentance. God declares that he had given the nations time to change but they refused to do so. Rather than repenting they just became more prone to living brutally. So now God would enact his judgement, the divine consequence for such actions.

Let me now read verses 3-5

Thus says the LORD:

For three transgressions of Damascus,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they have threshed Gilead
with threshing sledges of iron.

⁴ So I will send a fire on the house of Hazael,
and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad.

⁵ I will break the gate bars of Damascus,
and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven,
and the one who holds the scepter from Beth-eden;
and the people of Aram shall go into exile to Kir,

In this passage and the ones that follow to the end of verse 3 of chapter 2, Amos only cites a single crime against a nation. In the case of Syria the sin mentioned is the threshing of Gilead. This would not have been the only sin that the nation was guilty of, though it may have been “the one that broke the camel’s back.” It would be as if

God in pronouncing judgment against Hitler enunciated the holocaust. This was not the only sin the Nazis committed but the one most barbaric and vile.

When the text says “I will not revoke the punishment” it means that God’s judgment or wrath cannot be changed. The NIV’s treatment of this clause is helpful: “I will not turn back my wrath.” The point is that Yahweh’s decision is final.

And why will God do this? It is because Syria “threshed Gilead” Gilead was the northern territory of Israel east of the Jordan River. “Threshed” refers to harsh, excessive treatment, not to literally being run over by threshing sledges. The Syrians, whose capital was Damascus, had oppressed the people of that area for many years. A long, bitter history of fighting between Israel and the Syrians is attested in the OT (1 Kings 15:16-20; 2 Kings 10:32-33; 13:3, 7). It is not war in itself that is being denounced here, but the brutal treatment of the conquered.

Ben-hadad and Hazael were kings of Syria. Both Kings were synonymous with periods of oppression. Ben-Hadad was Hazael’s son. They were then followed by two other kings also called Ben-Hadad but un-related to the Ben-Hadad mentioned in Amos. What is important to keep in mind here is that Amos in referring to Ben-Hadad and Hazael points to the period up to around the year 790 or 780s BC. While referring to kings who reigned then, he looks forward to the burning of their residence in Damascus. But this does not happen for many decades. We read in 2 Kings 16 of another Syrian king named Rezin. It was during his reign some fifty or sixty years later, in the 730s, that Damascus eventually fell.

King Rezin and Pekah, the King of Israel in 733 moved their forces to the north to prepare for the impending Assyrian invasion. (Assyria was the looming Superpower of the eighth century BC). Tiglath-pileser, the King of Assyria attacked in 733 BC and captured much of the area of Galilee. He then turned his attention to Damascus, to which Rezin had fled. Assyrian records refer to Rezin as a “caged bird” in besieged Damascus. When Damascus fell in 732 BC, Rezin was executed and many citizens of Damascus were exiled, deported to Kir. So when Amos writes in verse 5 “I will break the gate bars of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and the one who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Aram (Aram is synonymous with Syria) shall go into exile to Kir” he was foretelling the outcome of Syria’s brutality. Kir, where the Syrian’s were deported was a province ruled by the Assyrians.

If we were to study each of the five pronouncements that follow this one we would see a similar pattern and could trace how God's judgement was enacted within history.

What do we learn from this study of Amos' pronouncement against Syria? We don't learn a simple message that has an easy application to our present context. Rather what we are given is perspective. When we begin to listen to the voice of the prophets and see how God is at work in history we are given perspective. You and I are alive for a short time and history is played out on a very large canvas indeed. But in order to see history aright and to understand how God is at work in this history we need to remember something that I was helped to see this week. A writer named George Weigel, who is the Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Centre in Washington observes:

The deepest currents of history are spiritual and cultural, rather than political and economic. In this way of thinking, history is not simply the by-product of the contest for power in the world—although power certainly plays an important role in it. And neither is history the exhaust fumes produced by the means of production. Rather, history is driven, over the long haul, by culture—by what men and women honor, cherish, and worship; by what societies deem to be true and good, and by the expressions they give to those convictions in language, literature, and the arts; by what individuals and societies are willing to stake their lives on.

Amos and all the prophets help us to recognize that if we try to understand history without seeing God as the one who stands amidst the smoke and destruction then we will not understand it aright. But as we set our eyes on Him and realize that while much of what we face is perplexing and seemingly senseless, God is at work. Not only this, but the prophets give voice with such clarity to what is true and good. But such a perspective requires space and an awareness that history is not senseless because while history is the human story, the prophet's reminds us even more that it is His Story. The prophetic character is not one we readily identify with because they so often speak a language that we don't understand. Amos would have us realize that like the character Tree Beard, the Ent from the Lord of the Rings we can't be hasty. God often works slowly and methodically. Amos names kings who reigned a couple of decades before he gave voice to God's sorrow and the Prophet pronounces a judgement that will not be enacted for another fifteen to twenty years.

To read the prophets aright means we need to slow down and see the Big Picture. A picture captured by Amos. A picture symbolized by St. Paul's standing erect amid the flames and smoke of London 1940.