

# Sermon

## (Amos 5: 14-24)

“Let Justice let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Let me tell you about a society of peace and prosperity that existed long ago. In this society, many people had much more than they needed. The construction business was experiencing an unprecedented boom; elaborate wine cellars and even personal vineyards were in vogue. All the markets were buzzing; the communications, entertainment, and travel industries had never enjoyed such escalating profits.

The men and women of this society—at least the ones who had the money—would have been shocked to hear that there were some in their midst who enjoyed none of these pleasures, people leading lives of quiet desperation. The people on the hilltops would have been greatly offended had anyone dared suggest that the dispossessed were their responsibility—that, in fact, it was their uncaring wealth that was responsible for the plight of the invisible poor.

The scene I have set is not in Calgary in 2004, though it could be, but in Samaria in the Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C. The prophet Amos was so shocked by conspicuous consumption on such a grand scale that he realized that this was a novel form of social injustice. In the passage immediately preceding the one I read this morning, listen to what he says

<sup>10</sup> They hate the one who reproves in the gate,  
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore because you trample on the poor  
and take from them levies of grain,  
you have built houses of hewn stone,  
but you shall not live in them;  
you have planted pleasant vineyards,  
but you shall not drink their wine.

<sup>12</sup> For I know how many are your transgressions,  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and push aside the needy in the gate.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.

Do you see what Amos is saying here? The gate referred to in verse 10 would be the equivalent of our downtown. It is the centre of commerce and decision making. Those in control of the gate have wealth and of course power and they want to use these levers to pad their own pockets and get wealthier still. They had no concern about those who were the most needy in their country. As a result of this the needy were both trampled on and pushed aside. But this is not a message the wealthy wanted to hear. Amos knows this and so he says “they abhor the one who speaks the truth and the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time..”

Prophets are, by their nature, inconvenient party-poopers. Those in control usually want to shut them out and shut them down if they can. Prophets are ignored because they tell us what is true right now and such truth is inconvenient. Amos is the first in a long line of Hebrew prophets who tell the people the truth, however unwelcome, about how they actually stand with God.

The Jewish prophets had an amazingly united view of life. They did not need to distinguish prayer and moral action as if these were separate movements: to do justice, to love mercy, to walk with God—that is, to be moral and prayerful—were all simply aspects of the same process.

A woman who thought deeply about worship, named Evelyn Underhill wrote this many decades ago:

A ceaseless moral striving, a steady effort to please God – must be part of worship. The worshipper cannot divorce faith from works, or adoration from ethics. To worship well is to live well”

Amos accused the people of Israel in words that seared and phrases that smote. They "cram their palaces," he said, "with violence and extortion." They had "sold the upright for silver and the poor for a pair of sandals". But he also said that all this could be reversed, if only the people of Israel would turn away from their own self-absorption and toward those who, however silently, cry out for help. "Then," promised Amos justice would roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24).

I have said what I just did so that we can better understand what is being said in the passage appointed for our study today. In these verses Amos begins with a plea:

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> Hate 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.

- Look what Amos is saying here. This is called a parallelism. The same thing is repeated for added emphasis.

- Seek good, hate evil, love good, establish justice in the gate

- Consequence will be that the God of hosts will be with you and the God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

- I am not sure why Joseph is mentioned. Perhaps because he was someone whose life was spent in the Gate. He was the Prime Minister of Egypt and was second in power to the Pharaoh. Joseph was someone with power and wealth who used these to serve the needy.

- But Amos is all too aware that the people will not listen to him. They will continue to love evil and corruption and have a disdain for goodness and justice. So.....

Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing; and in all the streets they shall say, "Alas! alas!" They shall call the farmers to mourning, and those skilled in lamentation, to wailing; <sup>17</sup> in all the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through the midst of you, says the LORD.

- This is pointing to the day that God will judge Israel if they do not turn from the course they are on. It is further emphasized by what he says in verses 18 – 20, in what is called the Day of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> The Israelites saw the day of the Lord often

in terms of God's judgement of the nations around them. However here Amos says that on that day you will be judged. So don't desire this day.

<sup>18</sup> Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.

<sup>20</sup> Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

- And why will it be such a day? The answer is given in verses 21-23

<sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

- Amos' cry is that the people's worship is not shaping how they live.

- Remember the quote I read earlier from Evelyn Underhill? Let me read it again:

A ceaseless moral striving, a steady effort to please God – must be part of worship. The worshipper cannot divorce faith from works, or adoration from ethics. To worship well is to live well”

Amos' critique of the Israelites was the they had divorced faith from works and adoration from ethics. And so he cries out in verse 24”

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Then and only then, says God, will your worship be pleasing to me.

What does it mean to worship God? The prophet Amos addresses kinds of unacceptable worship that are still a problem in the church today. Although many churches are struggling with people's preferences for different styles of worship format a much deeper and more serious issue is the lifestyle people follow after the worship service is over.

The ethics of a worshiper matter. If our lives do not overflow with justice and righteousness, one must ask if the goal of worship has been achieved and if God will

in any way be pleased. True and acceptable worship is not so much about issues of the style adopted by a particular congregation, but the extent to which the worshiper's life is transformed by being in the presence of a holy God. That transformation results in adoration of the Almighty, praise of the Father, Son, and Spirit, thankfulness for God's grace and mercy, and a recommitment to walk in his ways

A second application flows from this first principle. God hates, despises and abhors deceptive worship that draws no connection between life and ethics. No one can be neutral before God. The ethics of justice and righteousness are not optional characteristics that would be nice to see in a few worshipers. The text makes its case without reservation or qualification. God will not accept certain kinds of Hebrew or Christian worship. He does not say that anything goes, or do the best you can, or do what makes people feel good about themselves so that they will have a high self-esteem.

For you see any true worship not only connects us with God, it is also to connects us with others, especially those whom Amos refers to as the poor and the needy in the gate.

One of the worst features of contemporary society is its tendency to leave each of us locked up in himself or herself, connection-less. To lessen this isolation we have developed all kinds of therapies, spiritual, psychological, and physical—from groups that meet and talk endlessly to day spas, week spas, month spas, life spas. But none of these things, from primal scream to herbal wrap, seem to be doing the trick, any more than the huge houses and wine parties of the Israelites did the trick for them. What we need to do is open our heart to the plight of others, as if our heart were a dam, so that indeed our justice and compassion may flow. There is no other way to walk with God.

And it is here that I think we need to be particularly cautious in Alberta. We live in a province where we celebrate our wealth. We are no longer indebted to the banks. But this is leading to a kind of pride known as hubris. What is hubris? It is an overweening pride or self-confidence that leads to feelings of superiority. This shows itself in an overbearing manner or attitude or in excessive claims of position, dignity, or power or that unduly exalts one's own worth or importance. I am concerned that we are as a people prone to the sin of hubris, the same sin that I would suggest was at the heart of Israel's disease.

We live in a Province where hubris can all too easily result in our neglect of the needy where the wealthy can become wealthier still. I am concerned that hubris has gotten

hold of our Premier in recent years. May we pray for him and for ourselves that we will see and name this sin for what it is?

If Amos was with us today what might he ask us Albertans?

Perhaps he would ask:

Why is it that the wealthiest province in the country has the lowest minimum wage?  
Why is it that our Premier chose to highlight those who abuse the Assured Assistance for the Severely Handicapped programme with little talk given to a discussion of raising the minimum wage so that it is just or increasing the money people receive who are on AISH to a level that is appropriate.

It is as we ask ourselves these questions, and see what Amos is saying in this passage as a whole that the words given in the Prophecy we heard on June 6<sup>th</sup> of this year speak with a power that resonates with what Amos said so many centuries ago.

I see this land, this culture. It is rich, fat and bloated. You lack nothing! Everything is provided for, and yes, in abundance! I see the gods of money, of avarice, of greed and lust stretching their tentacles throughout this land. New temples to other gods are raised, and people worship in them. I know the evil that dwells here. You think you are rich! But your eyes are blind! Foolish people – look again and see what I see.

Yes - you are part of this! You live both in it, and of it. And I call you out! You must not live this way. You are temples of the Holy Spirit, so why then do you worship in the temples of Babylon? Do you not see it? Well then, I the Lord will declare it for you. The land is corrupt and evil, there is no knowledge or love of God. Each person goes their own way, and they do what pleases them. They will reap what they have sown! I the Lord have spoken!

I tell you the truth, nothing will change until you are transformed into my image. Nothing will change until you are removed from the company of the harlot. But if you are willing, I will work such a change amongst you, that you will be left awed in My power. Do you think I cannot do it? Test me, and see, for the Lord is good.