

Sermon – Joy Mennonite Church
October 12, 2013
Life lessons from Amos 5

Introduction:

NOTE TO THE READER: This is the written version of a sermon I preached at Joy Mennonite Church in Oklahoma City, however, I did make some tweaks on it in the spoken version which can be downloaded at www.jmbranum.com/audio/20131013-AUDIO-SermononAmos.aac

This morning's message is a rewrite of a paper I wrote for one of my seminary classes at AMBS. The paper was about one of the most potent discussions of social justice in scripture, Amos chapter 5.

In today's message I will discuss the context, the structure and the core meaning of the text in its original social context. After that I will shift to talk about the application of the text in our modern contexts.

I: The context of Amos 5

This chapter needs to be understood in the context of the book of Amos as a whole.

The book of Amos records the prophecies of Amos, who ministered during the reigns of King Uzziah of Judah and King Jeroboam II of Israel, likely around 760 BCE.¹ This was an era in which the twin kingdoms of Judah and Israel enjoyed relative peace and were not facing immediate threats from their more powerful neighbors. Apparently this time of peace led to a high level of economic prosperity, at least for the wealthy.²

Amos was a prophet from Tekoa in Judah³ but he was not part of the professional prophetic guilds but rather was what we might call today a bi-vocational minister, since in

1 “Amos” *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 1216.

2 Id. at 1216.

3 Amos 1:1

Amos 7:14 he describes himself as being a herdsman and a tender of sycamore trees.⁴

Despite his Judean citizenship, Amos' message was directed at Israel.

While it is possible that Amos himself wrote his message, it is more likely that the present text of Amos came to us by way of a later Judean writer/editor who compiled the oral tradition of Amos' message.^{5 6}

II. The structure of Amos 5

Scholars and preachers like to break texts up into manageable chunks. These are called "pericopes." These chunks aren't always clearly defined (remember the Bible in its original manuscripts lacked both paragraphs and punctuation), so we have to look for changes in theme, flow and genre.

I think we can see 6 pericopes in Amos 5.

A. The first two pericopes

Verses 1-7 and verses 8-9 move from a prophecy of coming destruction to a depiction of who God is, depicting God as one who is powerful and able to bring destruction.

The author also says in these sections that the nation will soon fall because of its sins and that hope will only come from those who actively seek the LORD and repent from evil. There is no hope in the traditional religious rituals at Bethel, Gilgal⁷ or Beersheba⁸.

B. Amos 5:10-15

<Read Amos 5:10-15>

4 Note on Amos 7:14 *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 1226.

5 "Amos" *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 1217.

6 In fact arguably we have several points where it appears that an obvious Judean bias has entered into the text. One example is from the closing section of the book which refers to a day in which the "booth of David that is fallen" will be raised up. This reference (out of place in a book of prophecy directed at the southern kingdom of Israel) must have been written almost two centuries later during the Babylonian captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah. - See Note on Amos 9:11-15 *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 1216, also see Collins, John J. *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 159.

7 Collins, John J. *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 157.

8 Note for Amos 5:5 *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 1222.

The genre is a return to the mode of the oracle of the first pericope, however, the specific message of this section is focused on the social sins of Israel. These sins include a hatred of those who tell painful truth (which sounds a lot like the whistleblowers of today)⁹, mistreatment of the poor,¹⁰ and especially a broken judicial system¹¹ that lets the rich buy justice through bribes.¹²

The prophet's remedy to this injustice is complicated. At first the prophet gives the enigmatic advice to “keep silent for such a time; for it is an evil time,”¹³ which seems to call for the faithful to pull away from civic engagement; but then a few verses later the prophet gives the advice to be active and engaged: “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.”¹⁴ Possibly the prophet is saying to be wise and prudent in this “evil time” but also to seek to right wrong that can be righted.

The prophet also says that if justice is restored that it *may* be that God will be merciful to a remnant of the nation,¹⁵ but there is an element of uncertainty. The timid word *may* screams out at the reader.

D. The next sections

The next two sections are Amos 5:16-17 and Amos 5:18-20. These sections continue to lament the coming destruction to come and the horrors of the coming captivity.

9 Amos 5:10

10 Amos 5:11

11 The reference in Amos to “the gates” refers to the legal system of their day. *See* Note for Amos 5:10 and 5:12 *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 1223.

12 *See* Amos 5:12.

13 Amos 5:13

14 Amos 5:15

15 Amos 5:15

E. Amos 5:21-27

The last pericope of Amos 5 is an oracle. There are no opening lines of “thus says the LORD.” Instead the LORD speaks directly in the first-person through the prophet to deliver a shocking message: God hates the religion of Israel!

This hatred of shallow religion is absolute. Even when these practices are taken with great solemnity¹⁶ and great cost,¹⁷ God is not pleased. The answer is clear. Justice and righteousness are the missing ingredients¹⁸ and without these factors, destruction is certain.

The message of this portion of the text is jarring in the ear. Much of Jewish scriptures insists on the importance of right ritual practice, yet the prophet Amos is telling us that the LORD says that this kind of religious practice is hated by God. In fact the later portion of this pericope reminds the reader that the Hebrews did not offer sacrifices during their wilderness wanderings and yet were still preserved,^{19 20} which seems to say that the nation of Israel would be saved if it did righteous acts, even if the ritual acts were neglected. This would certainly be a revolutionary teaching!

The closing words of this pericope are sarcastic, calling for the nation of Israel to embrace

16 Amos 5:21

17 Amos 5:22

18 Amos 5:24

19 Amos 5:25

20 Interestingly it seems that Amos is unaware of the writings of the Torah that do describe ritual sacrifices by the Hebrews during this time. - Note for Amos 5:25 *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 1224.

their borrowed Mesopotamian idols since the LORD has rejected them for their failure to act justly. The oracle ends by saying that their new “gods” will not save them from the inevitable Assyrian occupation and captivity.²¹

III. Core Message

Amos 5 has three key themes. The first theme is that Israel is condemned because it has failed to live up to the community standards of social justice (as articulated by the Torah). As discussed earlier, Amos 5 (particularly in its third pericope) speaks clearly and specifically about the social sins of Israel. These sins are not abstract in nature but rather are grounded in the basic *shema* principles²² that were supposed to undergird the covenant relationship of the children of Israel with each other and with God.

The second theme is that the LORD will bring destruction to Israel for its failure to practice justice. This coming destruction is both certain and horrible. There is hope that God might be gracious to a remnant²³ but the time is long past for God to show mercy on the nation as a whole. The horrors of captivity are near.²⁴

The final theme of the chapter is that the LORD hates rituals and sacrifice that are divorced from righteous living; it is better for the nation to neglect the rituals (as Amos said the nation did during its wilderness wanderings) than to neglect basic justice to the poor.²⁵

21 Amos 5:27

22 Note on Deuteronomy 6:4-9 *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) 267.

23 See Amos 5:4a, 5:6a, and 5:15.

24 Amos 5:27

25 Amos 5:24-25

IV. Application

There are several ways we can apply this text.

First we should ask ourselves the tough questions about our nation:

1. How are we treating radical truth-tellers and whistleblowers? Are we prosecuting those who tell us painful truth or are we listening to them? Why is Private Manning in prison? And why is Edward Snowden in exile?
2. How are we treating the poor? Are they receiving fair wages for their labor? Do they have access to basic health services? Are the schools in poor neighborhoods as good as those in rich neighborhoods? These are all questions we must ask.
3. What about justice system? How are people treated? Is it fair? Do poor people get the same access to legal services that rich people and corporations get?

If the answers to these questions is that America has committed many of the same sins as the northern kingdom of Israel, then we next must how we are called to respond to this great evil.

I think Amos would give us this advice...

1. Be wise. Amos 5:13 would remind us that there are times when the prudent are silent. When tangling with the powers of this world, we need to be aware of the danger and act thoughtfully.

2. Be proactive in working for the good. - This is not passive quietism but rather an engaged process of actively seeking the good and working for it.

3. Never let religion keep us from doing the good. Religion is rubbish if it does not lead us to doing good.

That's the application of this text as I see it... but I also think we need to go a little further and question this text and that's where I want to close the message.

In considering the application of this text, I cannot help but consider it from a personal perspective. A year after graduating from college, I spent the summer of 2001 working in my father's small-town Oklahoma law office. During that summer I got to see the injustice of our criminal justice system and how it mistreated the poor. I was frustrated by what I saw, but was uncertain as to what my faith might have to say about this injustice. Part of me felt that I was called to a life of ministry but another part of me felt morally obliged to do something to combat the evil of what I saw in the justice system.

In the midst of my personal questioning, I took a week off in July to attend the Cornerstone Christian Festival in Illinois with two friends from my church in Austin. While I mostly focused on hearing my favorite bands, I also attended several workshops, including those on issues of social justice. In one of the sessions a man named Andrew Mandell (lead singer of the Celtic-punk band *Ballydowse* and member of a CPT delegate to Iraq) got into a heated exchange with a member of the audience. I don't remember the details of the argument but I do remember Andrew telling the audience member to "read the book of Amos and then you'll understand what I'm talking about." I remember thinking, "I can't remember much about the book of Amos," so I cracked open my Bible later that week and starting reading Amos. When I

came to Amos 5:12's statement about the "poor being denied justice at the gates," I was convinced that God was speaking directly to me. I knew I had seen many of the poor of our day being denied justice in our courts (which were the modern equivalent of the "gates" of the ancient world") and I was angered by it, but now I believed that God cared and was angered too. It was then that I was convinced that I was called to become an attorney.

I think a lot of good came from this conclusion but there was also some real harm. I felt that I *should* become a lawyer because I would be fighting for the rights of the oppressed, but down deep I was very unhappy with the actual work of being a lawyer. The things that brought me joy were outside the law: writing, art, preaching, bicycling, gardening and traveling. I had talents that helped me to succeed in law school (especially my voracious reading habits and my love of debate) but I lacked the joy of those who found joy in the law.

But I let the *shoulds* rule over me. I was miserable in law school but I found relief by seeking to subvert the experience. I decided not to focus on my grades but rather to plunge deep into activism. It was this plunge that led me finally to Joy Mennonite Church, where I found a church home that affirmed my desire to work for good in the world. In time several of us founded the Oklahoma Center for Conscience and in 2006 I became lawyer.

For the next seven years I pushed hard in my legal activism. Sometimes I did other things to pay the bills, but most of the time I focused my energy on military law. At first I sought to simply help as many GI's as possible be discharged early from the military. In time I ended up working with many combat veterans who were suffering from terrible PTSD, as well as a few courageous soldiers who were pushing for discharge for reasons of conscience.

This was good work in many ways but it was also completely unsustainable. I did not maintain appropriate boundaries with my clients and got too enmeshed in their lives. I often worked for too little pay and I grew resentful and cynical. And I lost hope. And then I finally I developed terrible depression and at times even secondary symptoms of trauma, from having heard too many terrible war stories from my clients.

I am now at a place of recovering my life and recovering my joy. Being married to my best friend, Becky, has transformed my life for the good. And becoming a father has readjusted everything. But I'm also still left with the questions that are hanging in the air.

As a church, I think it is important that we hear both the good and bad stories. For me, the challenge of Amos 5 still eats at me. I don't want to be silent while Private Manning is in prison. I don't want to be silent while the poor are being treated like dirt by the system. But I also know that living a life that is grounded in anger alone is a recipe for disaster.

Of those around me, I do think about a few positive examples: Moses & Sadie both come to mind, but I also think of Bob Waldrop. Bob is often fired-up to fight for causes, but he also does the practical work of delivery groceries and planting gardens. And he keep laughing. I almost never see him not smiling. And Sadie is the same way.

This message doesn't have an ending because I am hoping that you all, as the community of faith will continue this conversation in our response time. I am hoping that we, together, can answer these two questions...

1. How do we confront evil without drowning in it?
2. How do we be both proactive in making the world better but also wise about our ways of

doing it?

Benediction for after sharing time...

Creator God,

Help us to see the world as it is and then to be ready to take wise proactive action in response to what we see.

Help us to be in solidarity with the whistleblowers and with all those who tell prophetic painful truth.

Help us to remember the poor and to stand with them, in their struggles for good schools, fair wages and fair court systems.

Help us to see all of the systems of oppression for what they are.

But also help us to find ways to not drown in this looking.

We desperately need moments of joy to keep us going in hope.

We need to see the goodness of the world and to believe that the fullness of your *shalom* vision is possible.

We pray in faith that you can transform our vision and help us to see things as they could be in the Kingdom of God.

We pray this in the name of the one who was always in solidarity with those on the margins,
Amen.