

“After Church”

The Little Book of AMOS

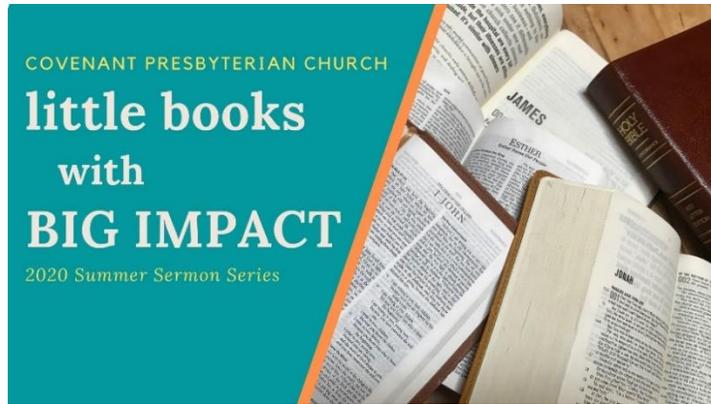
Amos 5:21-24

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We continue our “Little Books with BIG Impact” series with the little book of Amos, one of the 12 so-called minor prophets we find at the end of the Old Testament. Amos was a prophet from the 8th century before Christ and the common era, and he is only cited twice in the New Testament. He’s not very popular because there is a lot of doom and gloom in the little book.

Chapter 1 verse 2 actually says “the Lord roars.” And so the book begins, with Amos denouncing several communities that are neighbors to Israel.

With a similar sort of formula, Amos proclaims God’s anger at the sin of these neighbors. To the people of Edom, God’s wrath is coming because they show no pity, and rampage, and murder. God says “I’m not putting up with this any longer.”

God’s Message: “Because of the three great sins of Edom
—make that four—I’m not putting up with her any longer.
She hunts down her brother to murder him. She has no pity, she has no heart.
Her anger rampages day and night. Her meanness never takes a timeout.
For that, I’m burning down her capital, Teman, burning up the forts of Bozrah.”

--Amos 1:11-12 (*The Message*)

I imagine the people of Israel heard these denunciations with a sense of self-satisfaction. We humans like to point out the flaws of others and hear the good things about ourselves.

That’s why Jesus said to take the plank out of our eye before trying to take the speck out of someone else’s eye.

We feel better about ourselves when we point out or at least hear about the flaws of others.

If I began a sermon talking about the “flaws” of the Canadiens and the Mexicans, we might be proud of the USA. Or if I shared the “obvious shortcomings” of Minnesotans and Michiganders, we Wisconsinites would feel better about our great state, and you might expect that I would continue by singing the praises of the USA or of Wisconsin.

But this wasn’t the plan of Amos.

After denouncing Edom, Damascus, Gaza, Moab, and more, Amos has strong words for the people of Israel. Rather than telling them how wonderful and blessed and holy they were, he denounces them even more strongly than the neighbors, for trampling on the poor, for apparently selling people into slavery for sandals or silver.

Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way

--Amos 2:6-7 (NRSV)

Amos proclaims God's word, calling out the people of Israel for trampling the poor, stealing their food, taking bribes, kicking the outcasts when they are down.

You run roughshod over the poor and take the bread right out of their mouths,
I know precisely the extent of your violations, the enormity of your sins. Appalling!
You bully right-living people, taking bribes right and left
and kicking the poor when they're down.

--Amos 5:11-12 (*The Message*)

Amos has plenty of strong words for the political and economic elites behind this injustice, presumably all men in a world of very traditional gender roles. But Amos also has sharp words, for the wealthy wives who were more interested in having a drink in their luxurious homes, than caring for people in need.

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!"

--Amos 4:1 (NRSV)

So throughout the little book of Amos we read about God's anger at greed and mistreatment of poor people.

But God seems particularly angry at the religious people, who couldn't wait for their religious festivals and the sabbath to be done, so they could get back to exploiting the poor.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain;
and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will...practice deceit with false balances,
⁶ buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals....

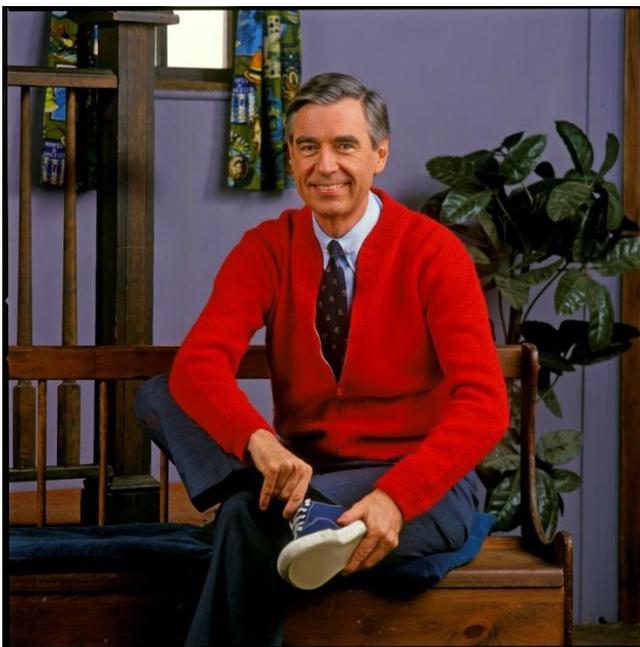
--Amos 8:4-6 (NRSV)

We hear the anger of God at religious people who seem to just be going through the motions of being religious most strongly in chapter 5, in perhaps the best-known verses of the book.

In stunningly strong language, Amos denounces their hypocrisy, telling them their worship is a waste of time. Imagine gathering for worship and hearing the word of God as this:

- ²¹ 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.

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture. Even the challenging ones.



Any Mr. Rogers fans out there?

Fred Rogers starred in “Mr Rogers Neighborhood”—a PBS show for decades, which helped children learn about compassion, kindness, and love.

He exuded compassion, kindness, and love. He had an almost unreal sense of gentleness about him.

I remember reading years ago that his wife was asked if he acted the same at home.

Her response: “What you see is what you get.”

In other words, Mr Rogers practiced what he preached. He was consistent. He lived with authenticity and integrity.

I am particularly fond of him because he was a Presbyterian pastor, and he was clear that he sought to follow Jesus faithfully, striving to reflect Christ’s love.

It was this kind of sincerity that Jesus called for in his followers, wanting them to put his words into practice.

At the conclusion of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples what was really important was putting the words of God in practice, doing the will of God, hearing the word and acting on it. He didn’t want superficially religious people. He wanted authenticity and integrity.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.... Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

--Matthew 7:21,24 (NRSV)

This is what we strive for here at Covenant:

we try to learn God's word, we try to learn about God's world, we try to learn about God's love. And then we figure out ways to try to make the word and the love of God real in our daily living.

Learning God's love, living God's love.

We strive for authenticity and integrity, living our faith in our daily routines, loving our neighbors.

Our Presbyterian Church *Book of Order* reflects this same desire for authenticity and integrity. In the beginning of the section on worship we read:

This Directory for Worship reflects the conviction that the faith, life, and worship of the Church are inseparable.

In other words, what we read and pray and hear and sing should become part of our daily life.

Amos was NOT seeing this connection between worship and daily living.

The people were apparently going through the motions of worship but not living out their faith tradition—a tradition that called them to love neighbors, a tradition that repeatedly called them to care for widows and orphans and people in need, a tradition that called them to care for refugees and outcasts.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

--Leviticus 19:18

You shall not abuse any widow or orphan.

--Exodus 22:22

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

--Leviticus 19:33-34

So Amos denounces the people of Israel for ignoring these core teachings, and proclaims hope for justice to flow like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.



In Hebrew the words are *mishpat* and *sedakah*, justice and righteousness, and they permeate the faith tradition.

Amos wasn't seeing justice and righteousness in the people of Israel. He was troubled with the ways the supposedly-religious people of Israel were spending their time, their money, and their lives.

After worship, it was as if they hadn't heard the calls for justice and righteousness.

After worship, they continued being greedy and selfish.

After worship, apparently nothing changed.

Because of their failure to live out God's call, the nation was falling into destruction.

It's a sad and troubling little book to read.

Amos offers a few glimmers of hope, inviting the people to change. "Seek the Lord and live." (Amos 5:6)

But the words of hope are few; if you blink you miss them. Most of the book of Amos is doom and gloom. Amos proclaims that God is done with Israel, and it's time for punishment and destruction of their luxurious homes.

On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions,
I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house;
and the houses of ivory shall perish,
and the great houses shall come to an end, says the Lord.

--Amos 3:14-15

Toward the end of the book, God speaks through Amos simply and sadly saying: "The end has come upon my people Israel." (8:2)

It's not a very uplifting book. But the unjust conditions in the time of Amos were not very uplifting to say the least.

So what do we do with the doom and gloom?

While doom and gloom and judgment and the anger of God at our sin are themes we need to hear and wrestle with—probably more than we usually do—these themes are not the final words. We need to hear the full message of Scripture, not just one book or a few verses.

The Bible tells us of a God who is deeply concerned with sin and injustice, but also a God of forgiveness, second chances, and new life.

We see this message of forgiveness and new life in the prophets, perhaps best in the prophet Ezekiel, who had a vision of a valley of dry bones, a horrible scene of death. But the spirit of God brought those bones back to life.

We see this message of forgiveness and new life in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He called ordinary people to look honestly at their lives and their world, and then to repent, to turn around, to follow him and find new purpose, live for the Kingdom of God.

After his death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit of God continues to teach and guide and empower us.

The Presbyterian Church has a wonderful affirmation called “A Brief Statement of Faith” part of which affirms the work of the Holy Spirit, and you’ll hear from that statement in a bit.

This Holy Spirit is the same spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles—calling us, claiming us, engaging us, and giving us courage to work for justice and peace and righteousness in the world.

These are not just words to appreciate during worship.

They are words to wrestle with, to ponder, to put into practice, to live, to take to heart with authenticity and integrity, after worship is over.

In our world today, we are facing ongoing systemic racism and tensions, calls for police reform, a growing gap between rich and poor, a looming environmental catastrophe.

I’m glad to be part of the Presbyterian Church (USA)—as we are committed to wrestling with these issues.

We need spirit-filled people who are ready to work for justice and righteousness.

We need spirit-filled people who not only want to watch worship but to actually live out worship and be God’s presence in the world.

We need spirit-filled people who want to live as followers of Jesus with authenticity and integrity.

Our worship video will be done in about 10 or 15 minutes.

So after church today what are you going to do?

After church, after hearing about God’s call for justice and righteousness, is anything going to change?

After church, how are you going to spend your time, how are you going to spend your money, how are you going to spend your life?

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Let us pray— *Thank you God for the disturbing and challenging words of Amos. By the power of your Spirit, give us courage to work for justice and righteousness and peace. Show us the way. Amen.*

