

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 29, 2019

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 • Psalm 146 • 1 Timothy 6:6-19 • Luke 16:19-31

Since Anthony is here, this is going to be a little shorter than usual. It was either shorten the sermon or do confession with no forgiveness.

The Bible is full of different types of writings. There are poems like Song of Songs. There are bios like the gospels. There is apocalyptic literature like Daniel and Revelation. There are epistles like Romans and 1 Corinthians. The type of literature we often pay attention to the least is the writings of the prophets. Which is ironic because the prophetic writings are the largest part of the Hebrew Bible.

There are a lot of reasons we don't talk about them much though. Sometimes the prophets are just weird. Isaiah walks around naked. Ezekiel goes on a diet of barley cakes baked over cow manure. Jeremiah hides his underwear under a pile of rocks to make a point about Israel's unfaithfulness.

But it's also because prophets make us a little bit uncomfortable. They make a kind of claim on us. They say things that we're not supposed to say out loud. They point out things we'd rather keep hidden. I won't ask for a show of hands, but today's reading from Amos should have made you a little bit uncomfortable. *Is Amos talking about me?*

The prophets are all different. They lived in different places at different times and wrote about different things. But what all the prophets have in common is they give us a different kind of vision. We often think of prophets as telling the future, but in the Hebrew Bible that's not what prophets do. Prophets give people a different vision of the world that they live in. We could say that they show the people what God's vision looks like.

And they do that in two primary ways. The first way they change our vision is by criticizing. The prophets look at the stories we tell about ourselves and they say, "This is not what's actually happening." You've told yourself this story to make yourself feel a certain way, but it's actually not what's happening. If you think back to when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, Pharaoh has a certain story he tells. That he is in charge. That time bends to his demands. That he depends on no one. Moses criticizes that story. He says that the story you've told yourself that you are in charge is not true. God is the one who is in charge. So when the prophets criticize something, they say that we aren't seeing the whole picture.

The second way prophets change our vision is by energizing. This is basically saying that the way things are now is not the way things have to be. If you think to the story of the exile when the Israelites are deported from their homeland, they think that the covenant is over. But the prophet Isaiah comes in and starts talking about what things will be like when they get to go home. Every valley filled in and every mountain brought low. Isaiah invites the people to imagine that God's perspective is different from their perspective.

So that's the prophetic dynamic. Criticizing (this is not the way things are) and energizing (this is not the way things have to be).

Last week, we were introduced to Amos, one of the prophets from the Old Testament. I gave you a very brief sketch last year of Amos' historical context, so I'll give you an even briefer one this week. Amos lived as a farmer in the eighth century BC. He lived in the southern kingdom but he was called as a prophet to the northern kingdom. And he lives in a time of immense wealth. That's the story the Israelites tell themselves. We have peace, we have prosperity, we have everything perfect.

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What do you think Amos does? Criticize or energize? He criticizes. Let's walk through today's text and look at what he criticizes them for. So this reading is addressed to the people who are "at ease in Zion," Zion is Jerusalem in the southern kingdom, and who feel secure on Mount Samaria, referring to the northern kingdom. So already you have a set up here. It's addressed to people who have power and influence and who don't have to worry about anything. They lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches. And remember that Amos is a farmer. He's a manual laborer. The people he's writing to aren't. The implication is that they make their money off of other people's labor.

They "drink wine from bowls." Maybe you hear this and think the word for "bowl" here is actually something like "glass." It is not. So they are indulging in huge amounts of alcohol. They anoint themselves with the finest oil. The language suggests that they're practically dousing themselves in it. And here's the most important line. They "are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph." "Joseph" refers to the northern kingdom. And the "ruin of Joseph" refers to the poverty and inequality that's all around them. They are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. That's what Amos is so upset about.

So often when we think about sin, we think about actions. We think about behaviors. In the medieval period, there was this famous list of the seven deadly sins. Envy, sloth, greed, etc. They're all things that you do. And we've internalized that definition in many of our churches. When you confess your sins, you're confessing the bad stuff you did. You knew it was bad, you knew it was harmful, and you thought, "Buckle up."

When the prophets like Amos talk about sin, when Jesus talks about sin, they talk about it differently. If you read the gospels, you notice that Jesus is not primarily concerned with people who do bad things. Jesus is concerned with people who see suffering, who see evil, who see oppression, and do nothing. They are people who cannot be bothered by the world. They are the people like the ones Amos is writing to. In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about a person like this, a rich man who feasts sumptuously every day while a man starves outside his door. He's probably drinking bowls of wine. What does the man do wrong? Well, nothing. The problem is that he doesn't do anything. That's what happens in a society where no one can grieve. They can't imagine anything other than the way things are. They see suffering and evil and they say, *That's just the world we live in*. How often do we say something similar?

To get back to our prophetic model, grieving is a way of criticizing the way things are. It's a way of saying that these outcomes are not inevitable. The man starving outside the gates of the rich man's home is not supposed to be there. The crushing income inequality that Amos calls the "ruin of Joseph" is not just the way things work. They are wrong. They are scandalous. So we grieve. We grieve to call people's attention to the things that are happening outside of their immediate experience.

But grieving is also a way of energizing. Because what do we find when we look outside the gates of our cul de sac? What do we find when we get put down the bowl of wine and get off our ivory bed? We find the poor, the marginalized, and those we find it easiest to ignore. And that's where we find Jesus, too. And wherever Jesus is, a whole new world is possible.

Should that make us comfortable? No. It should make us really uncomfortable. But it should give us hope. Which is good. Because comfort can't save you. But hope can.

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