

LET JUSTICE ROLL!



Scripture:

Psalm 78:1-7

¹Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. ²I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, ³things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. ⁴We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

⁵He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; ⁶that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, ⁷so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.

Amos 5:18-24

¹⁸Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; ¹⁹as 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. ²⁰Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even 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. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. ²⁴But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God



LET JUSTICE ROLL!

Wow! Have you ever heard God so mad before? The angry talk here in this passage is from the prophet Amos, speaking on behalf of God. Amos is giving a strong warning to the Israelites for their misbehavior. Our Parent God was giving them one last chance to do the right thing before the children

of God would suffer the consequences of behaving badly.

You know as a parent how you might say, “Now Mommy is getting angry about your disobedient behavior!” That is basically what is happening here. But the consequences for their lack of justice and

righteousness are going to be much worse than going to time out.

Most people think of the prophet Micah when the subject of justice in the Bible comes up. Micah said the famous line, “What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.”

But Amos is also famous for saying, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!” Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasized this verse in his speech entitled, “*I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.*”

You may be wondering, like I was, what qualified Amos to say these angry things to the people of Israel? Amos was just a young shepherd boy when his homeland was under the rule of two powerful kings: Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam the Second of Israel.

But when he grew up, Amos bravely answered the call from God to be a prophet, which required him to move from the south to the north of Israel to proclaim God’s message to them. His prophetic work lasted just two years and ended when a massive earthquake hit the holy land.

GOD’S ANGER

As you heard from the passage today, basically God was very mad at the Israelites! There was peace and prosperity in the land at the expense of the poor. The rich people in the top level of their society were getting wealthier by the minute. (Sound familiar?)

At this point in time, when Amos declared God’s anger, a new King of Assyria had come into power who planned to conquer Israel and to incorporate Syria and Palestine into its fold. So suddenly, when they could see a major threat about to devour them, the Israelites feared for their safety and security.

They decided to listen to Amos. But it was too late. Amos warned them that they were about to reap what they had sown. He said they were going to pay for their lack of justice and neglect of the poor. And they did.

Amos’ message was direct and uncompromising. Due to Israel’s greedy ways social injustice reigned. Amos called for the Israelites to change

their behavior and remember that the Lord expected justice and righteousness from them.

It is interesting that in the book of Amos it is clear that God is angry with Israel for their neglect of the poor and for their prideful ways. And God also makes it clear to the Israelites, through Amos, that there are other peoples, and other nations chosen by God to show the loving relationship God has with humanity. He warned that Israel need not feel so secure in their exclusive favor from God. But that God was inclusive and favored other nations as well.

RIGHTEOUS LIVING

Amos communicates to Israel that God is disappointed that they were not continuing to work towards bringing the kingdom of God to earth. They seemed to be passively giving in to the seductions that came along with wealth and comfortable living. So through Amos, God called the Israelites to live righteous lives, which did not mean prideful lives. Righteous living is a quality of life in relationship with others in the community that gives rise to justice.

Righteousness means striving to be holy, being ethical, having integrity, and living your life authentically in relationship to others.

That means making sure that justice rolls in your neighborhood. No one is neglected, abandoned, or cheated out of the good life that you are living.

Faith and righteousness are linked. When you have faith in God and try to live your life righteously then you don’t hesitate to leave your comfort zone and go into the unknown to respond to God’s call to step out on a quest for good, helping others.

LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

True faith isn’t a deal where we use God to get special advantage or a secret magic formula for success. Faith in Jesus is not a mark of superiority or exclusion. True faith in Christ is about joining in God’s love and justice for everyone.

The prophet Amos, in today's passage, clearly gives the Israelites the key to their survival: Justice for all, like in our Pledge of Allegiance, "with liberty and justice for all!"

Amos reminds us that when we get out of our ivory towers, we come face to face and truly see the people around us who are suffering. And when we really see them, we see that our nation still does not have liberty and justice for all.

We, like the Israelites in the days of Amos, have become very distracted from faith by our wealth and comfort. We assume we must hoard our resources to secure our future. One in five children live in poverty in the United States. Twenty per cent of all kids in the United States are hungry.

I admit it is hard to take the risk of giving from our savings so others may live. Yet, the words of Amos ring as true for us today as they did in the eighth century B.C. (Before Christ).

ONE BIG FAMILY OF GOD

The wealthy getting wealthier stepping over those in poverty was not the way humanity was meant to live.

Then in Amos Chapter 6, following today's passage, Amos warns them once again saying, "Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches and for those who eat lambs and calves and who anoint themselves with the finest oils but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph."

The ruin of Joseph meant those who were troubled and struggling to live who were descendants of Joseph. All of Israel were descendants of Joseph, as they were also descendants of his father, Jacob, whose father was Isaac whose father was Abraham. Amos was reminding the Israelites that they were all from one big family of God as we remember that our neighbors who are homeless are related to us through our common ancestry.

So by the time Amos proclaimed our scripture passage for today (about despising their festivals and their burnt offerings), God had pretty much given up on his self-centered nation of Israel. He was about to teach them a lesson on the importance

of living simply with tangible concern for the wellbeing of others.

As hard as it is to hear, Amos reminds us that in some way, God holds us accountable for our transgressions. The transgression Amos was upset about was the transgression of allowing people to suffer in poverty in their nation. The Israelites had previously lived in a way where no one was without food or shelter. They had prospered together living in a way where all the people were taken care of by sharing their resources. But over time the disease of greed infected their society as it has our own, causing the poor to truly suffer.

BE AWARE OF THE SUFFERING

Jesus in his ministry on earth calls us to be aware of the suffering as he taught us to weep with those who weep. Mourn humanity's mourning, weep over humanity's weeping, be wounded by humanity's wounds, be in agony over humanity's agony.

Last week I preached about the Beatitudes. New Testament scholar, Clarence Jordan, one of the founders of Habitat for Humanity, offered an interesting reflection on "Blessed are those who mourn." He said,

**"Real mourners grieve over
injustice in God's world.
There are 'fake mourners' who say,
'sure, the world's in a mess, and I guess
maybe I'm a bit guilty like everybody
else, but what can I do about it?'
What they're really saying is that they
are not concerned enough about the poor
in the world to look for anything to do."**

Columbia University economist, Jeffrey Sachs, says there is something we can do about the poor in the world. In his book, *The End of Poverty*, he proposes that our generation can choose to end poverty if we put forth the effort and share our resources. After analyzing the economics of poverty he lays out a plan to make it possible to end poverty once and for all.

An article last year in the journal, *The Economist*, agreed with Sachs proposal. It reported

that the world has an astonishing chance to take a billion people out of extreme poverty by the year 2030. The article said that:

"Poverty used to be a reflection of scarcity. Now it is just a problem of identification, targeting and distribution. And that is a problem that can be solved if we put forth the effort to do so."

This article reinforces that we must first *see* the people suffering and then be willing to share resources.

In the middle of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous, "*I've Been to the Mountaintop*" speech, Dr. King said, "Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness." Then he goes on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan when Jesus talked about a certain man, who fell among thieves. He was left for dead in a ditch. Now you probably remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side. They didn't stop to help him. And finally a man of another race came by. He got down from his horse, and decided not to be just compassionate from afar. But he got down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need. Jesus pointed out that this was the good man, this was the great man, because he had the capacity to be concerned about his brother.

Reverend King went on to say, "Now you know, we use our imagination a great deal to try to determine why the priest and the Levite didn't stop. At times we say 'they were busy going to a temple meeting,' or they might have thought, 'I can't take the risk of saving someone outside my family.'"

But Martin Luther King, Jr. points out that in the story of the Good Samaritan, the first question the priest must have asked himself when he saw the man in the ditch. and the first question that the Levite must have asked himself also was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

In contrast, when the Good Samaritan came by, he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"

That's the question before us today. The question is not, "If I stop to help the people in need, what will happen to me?" The question is, "If I do not stop to help, and give what I can, what will happen to them?"

That's the question Amos asked the nation of Israel and that is the question God is asking each of us today about those in poverty. What will happen to them?

May justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!

Benediction: In the end, Amos paints a vision of restorative justice for the people of Israel. In Chapter 9:14 Amos, speaking for God, says, "I will restore my people." Even though they suffer for awhile, restoration happens. Restorative justice flourishes in the kingdom of God where the hungry are fed, the weak empowered, and the desperate find hope. Let us go and build this kingdom of God!

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forevermore. Amen



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