

Justice for All: Amos, Pastor Phil Strong

Text: Amos [selected]

8-14-16



Teaching Notes

Amos is a hard read. It's setting is foreign to me. It proceeds from an era only available to me through historians. It has a great deal of cultural practices with which I am unfamiliar. Linguistically, it incorporates lots of "turns of phrases" and "metaphors" which are lost on me. Mostly, it makes me uncomfortable.

What I do understand is the universality of the human condition: our pre-occupation with making work for us, with the occasional "God-boost" when we are unable to reach what we are grasping for. Our propensity to ensure our own well-being either in spite of the other, or at their expense. Our uncanny tendency to always see ourselves on the "*side of the right*"; as the "*good guys*".

It was into just such circumstances that we would find God continuously intervening, most often through another human whom he had taken into his counsel, in order to interrupt such deceptive and self-destructive cycles that man had created for themselves (Judges).

No one really seemed to aspire to the role of prophet. In fact, they seemed to vacillate between these moments of immovable confidence and almost debilitating melancholy.

Jeremiah 20:14, "*I curse the day I was born. May no one celebrate the day of my birth.*" It must have been impossible to pick out a b-day card for Jeremiah.

In each movement, the express purpose is not to "*serve the people with papers*", but to alter their present response as to avoid further damage and see God's desires come to bear right here and right now.

Some key phrases we find in Amos...

"for three sins, even for four... I will not let them go unpunished..."

This is not the earliest version of the (3) strikes rule, but it is a poetic means of describing a condition where people habitually fail to live into the desires of God.

"...but you still would not return to me, says the Lord..."

Amos asks us to imagine the human soul, so hardened and so unresponsive that it is incapable of repentance. Not because God doesn't long to be gracious, but because we won't pursue/receive grace (Isaiah 30:18).

"... I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living"

"... I will test my people with this plumb line. I will no longer ignore all of their sins..." ['plumb' if it is level or straight in relation to an objective standard] The plumb-line, in this instance, is not some common, culturally accepted values, but God's own rightness and how that becomes the standard by which everything else is measured.

We know little about Amos. We can say, he's not a religious paid-professional, he doesn't have a pedigree. He's the worst possible candidate, which means he's the most likely to be chosen of God. He's a blue-collar worker from Tekoa (south of Jerusalem), the dude with the *Cabela's* hat and the sheep manure on his boots. Amos is particularly qualified for (2) reasons: First, he is in no way "enmeshed" (indebted to) in the culture, so he can speak boldly about its deficiencies, but, second, his counsel is from God, so it is also hopeful and compassionate. Both postures were necessary to fulfill the role.

(3) themes in Amos:

1) a righteous God

2) a world gone wrong

3) hope of a creation set right

A righteous God:

The Bible is unflinching in its commitment to the conviction that the God being revealed in the narrative is the One, True, Creator-God and that he is not only "great", but he is "good" [great-capacities that separate him Romans 1:19 *"eternal power and divine nature"*: good- benevolent responses identify him with us. We can only really know God as good in relationship with him].

The OT prophets seemed keenly aware of a disturbing paradox: a flurry of religious activity amidst social disintegration. God always seems to "distances himself" from such activity: *'your offerings, your gifts, your festivals, your assemblies, etc.'* It's God pulling his endorsement. *"I can't be associated with that anymore."*

In that culture, sacrifice was an essential element of worship. In some primitive form, it was the experience of giving ourselves to God and being received by God. In such a system, it would be easy for the lines to get blurred; for the people to assume that if we *"give God what he wants, everyone will be happy!"* The prophet declares that the sacrifices were only acceptable as they rightly reflected the nature and character of God and resulted in right responses to our near ones. Expressions which honored God, but dishonored those he loves.

A world gone wrong:

Human history is the account of the failures of freedom. History is this context in which God is dismissed and defied, and where all of creation experiences the aftermath. We call it "fate". I think fate is humanity's copout for our failure to accept responsibility for all of the damage we have done to one another.

This serves as a "judgment" (assessment) which is, most often, not some punitive action on God's part, but his permission to allow us to pursue our own agenda; not a giving up, but a giving over, in order that we might be awakened to the ruinous nature of our determinations, independent of God (Romans 1).

Amos "*opens up a can*" on the surrounding nations. You can imagine the people's response of delight as Amos starts in on his message of doom toward the surrounding nations and the horror as he sums up his message with a stern rebuke of Israel herself. He starts "naming names" [pro-choice movement, the liberal media, gay-rights agenda... the church?]

Righteousness is God's stake in human history.

When we become indistinguishable, God is dismissible and the world is left with no viable alternative for life, other than human progress and ingenuity. Taking the resources and vision available to us and carving out some reality which works for us.

The onus is always on the *righteous* to establish just systems and conditions. Remember, we are the '*extra mile*' people. We are the '*clothes off our back*' followers of Jesus. We are the initiators of grace. The '*70 X 7*' people! [Matthew 5-7]

The prophets reminded the people that chosenness does not equate to favoritism or immunity. Because we are no longer under condemnation (Romans 8:1) doesn't mean that we are no longer beyond conviction or correction (Hebrews 12). Our chosenness demands something more of us.

"The time for judgment has come, and it must begin with God's household." 1 Peter 4:18

This judgment is not to be understood as individualized retribution for sin (Jesus has already absorbed all of that), but as a corrective, disciplinary action that we are called to take upon ourselves; an honest examination of how our faith professions are being supported by the "order" and "rightness" of our vocational posture, our financial habits, our relational health.

There is an evil even more insidious than the evil itself: indifference to evil. Being unmoved, unaffected.

The gospel knows nothing of an inner, personal salvation experience which does not transform our social structures and systems.

So, when a follower Jesus (righteous) observes injustice in any form (racism, bigotry, inequality, absence of clean drinking water), engagement is inevitable, not optional. To remain unmoved is, in some form, its own form of injustice.

Amos 9:11-15 [read]

Hope of a creation set right: [which is always the climax of prophetic vision]

Any thoughtful consideration of a world set right (where creation/future is heading) would have to speak about judgment. Judgment as...

... the rightful conclusion to a “restoration” Story.

None of us wants a God who is indifferent to *right and wrong*; who’s not committed to justice. It’s the basis of most of our appeals to him (why don’t you do something, how long, etc.) Judgment is God’s decisive “no” to evil and disorder and his definitive “yes” to shalom. It is the passionate response to the corruption of all that he loves.

... the welcomed determination of God, not the dreaded final encounter.

It may surprise you, but far from being portrayed as something to be avoided, the idea of judgment was actually something to be welcomed [unless, of course, you are actually benefiting from the ruinous arrangement].

“Let the heavens and the earth rejoice... for the Lord he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the earth with justice and the nations with his truth”. Psalm 96:13

... the ultimate expression of love and not the angry over-reaction of an intolerant and emotionally unstable deity.

Judgment must come, not because God is anxious to “*give ‘em what they deserve*”, but because each day of patience in a world of injustice and disorder means more violence, more abuse, more suffering, more death... more grief for us, more grieving for God.

We cry out, “*God, this has got to stop. What are you waiting for?*” His response, “*Everyone else*” (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4) God is a bit more optimistic than we are!

Jesus is the only one perfectly suited (anointed) for the role of Messiah because he responds, not from the posture of a disgusted and distanced deity, but as “God with us”... “God for us” (Matthew 1:23; Romans 8:31).

He not only knows what it means to be God, but what it means to be human! He is the “*man of sorrows*”... “*familiar with suffering*”... “*the one who bore in himself the chastisement that brought us peace*” (Isaiah 53).