

Let Justice Roll Down

Amos 5:12-14

I'd like to take a few moments to set the scene for today's Scripture. The 12 tribes of Israel had been united under King David and remained that way under his son, Solomon. When Solomon's son, Rehoboam, took the throne and threatened to be a ruthless leader, the 10 northern tribes broke away under the leadership of Jeroboam I. The two separate kingdoms were then known as Judah, in the south, and Israel, in the north. The kings of both nations led the people astray, prompting the Lord to send his prophets to call the people to repentance. The prophets were ignored and even killed, and so the people of Israel and Judah found themselves approaching the day of the Lord's wrath. Enter Amos.

The prophet Amos was a shepherd and a dresser of fig-trees, a simple man. Despite not having any priestly background and being a native of the southern kingdom of Judah, God asked Amos to carry his word to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel.

At the time of Amos, Jeroboam II was ruler in Israel. Under Jeroboam, the country was experiencing a season of great affluence. However, under all of that affluence the country was morally and spiritually corrupt. Sounds vaguely familiar, don't you think?

Amos was sent by God to denounce the corruption of the day and to warn the Israelites of his impending judgment.

At first the people of Israel may have been eager to hear what Amos had to say as he pronounced God's judgment of the surrounding nations. Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon and Moab, all of them were to feel God's wrath. I can imagine the people gathered around Amos to hear him speak and cheering him on as he pronounced judgment on their enemies. They would have been happy to see these nations receive their just desserts. But aren't we a bit like that, too? As we read about atrocities being committed in other countries, don't we think they should be dealt with somehow? Of course we do. But at the same time, we can be blind to atrocities being committed in our own country. Thankfully, some of these have been brought to light in recent years – sex trafficking, abuse of power by those in authority, hate crimes once swept under the rug and, at times in our countries dark past, even celebrated.

The Israelites were no different, because while the people of Israel were eager to hear what Amos had to say about the foreign nations, they were not so eager to hear what he had to say about them. "For crime after crime of Israel I shall grant them no reprieve," says the Lord in Amos 2:6. Amos's contemporary, Hosea, had already denounced the people for worshiping idols, now Amos was emphasizing the moral and social decay that resulted from the people turning their backs on God. The Israelites were sitting pretty and times were good, what did it matter to them what this Amos person thought? What about us? I think there were more than a few people here in the US who thought they were sitting pretty and times were good, until the stock market bottomed out. The

Israelites put their pleasure before praise and they were doomed to destruction. Are we doomed to destruction, also?

So how did the people of Israel respond to Amos' words? Let me ask you first, how might we respond to being told that unless we mend our ways God will bring great destruction upon us? Would we immediately start to clean up our act? Would we respond in the same way as the Israelites? How did they respond? They turned a deaf ear to Amos and God's message. They told Amos to go back to Judah.

But Amos did not go back to Judah. He continued to speak God's word to the Israelite nation. We pick up the story at chapter 5, verse 14:

The Lord says, "Seek good and not evil...Hate evil and love good." God is not stuttering here. Often in the books of prophecy you will notice that certain words or phrases are repeated, often several times. Whenever words or phrases are repeated in the Bible it is to make a point. It means that God is serious about this and we need to pay close attention to what he is saying to us.

"Seek good and not evil, that you may live and so the Lord God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken." God is telling his people that they are in grave danger as a result of their actions. Despite the warnings of the prophets, the people continued in wanton disobedience to God, worshipping idols, visiting temple prostitutes, and mistreating one

another. They were only giving lip service to God; their hearts were not in the right place.

Evidence of their disregard for the Lord was the blatant lack of justice found in the courts. The city gates were the courts of their day. They were the site of all legal actions, both personal and business. In the gates of Israel the poor were oppressed by the rich and powerful, widows and orphans were denied justice. Despite the many references to God's desire for justice for his people throughout the ancient writings and especially in the words of the prophets, justice was not to be found in the courts of Israel.

Because the people had not, and would not, repent of their evil ways, Amos brought these words to them, "Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: In all the squares there shall be wailing... they shall call the farmers to mourning... and in the vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through your midst." The name of the Lord is repeated three times in this verse! This is very serious business.

The people talked about the coming day of the Lord expecting him to win their battles for them. They didn't realize that there would be great loss of life when the Lord passed through the midst of his people. There would be so many dead that the farmers would be called on to provide mourning because there would not be enough professional mourners for all the deaths. The vineyards, normally places of joy and celebration, would be filled with the sounds of wailing, the loss of life would be so great. The people up to this point

have desired the day of the Lord's coming, now they will grieve his passing through their midst. Just a note here, that the choice of words is significant. In times past the Lord had passed over or passed by which indicated forgiveness, but this time he was to pass through their midst. Passing through their midst meant certain destruction, just as it did in the final plague in Egypt with the death of all the first born in that nation. This was not a day to be desired!

To illustrate what the day of the Lord would be like, Amos goes on to paint the picture of a man fleeing from a lion, only to encounter a bear. Escaping the bear and entering his house in exhaustion, the man leans against the wall of his house, only to be bitten by a snake hiding in the crevices of the wall. So it would be for these people. They might escape one calamity, only to find themselves assailed by another. The day of the Lord would be a truly dark day. Here's something to think about: Can we make any correlation between this story and events in our day and time?

In addition to their callous treatment of each other, they continued to hold feasts and festivals to God in their corrupt sanctuaries before the golden calf. To the Israelites these ceremonies were no more than an insurance policy to cover them in case the idols didn't come through. Because they called on his name they expected the Lord God to step in and save the day. But God said, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and

grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your feathered animals, I will not look upon them.” These displays were not enough for God to turn away his wrath against these people. Feasts and offerings did not satisfy Him because the people had turned their backs on true worship.

Despite the dire warnings he had issued, God is still a just and loving God who wants his people to repent and return to him. Even as He called for their destruction, God offered hope that if they would yet change their ways his wrath may be averted. God’s desire is that all people receive justice. He tells the Israelites, “...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The praise God seeks is justice for his people.

Can you imagine what justice rolling down like water, or righteousness like a flowing stream would look like? Let’s think about rolling waters for a moment.

Moving waters are not stagnant. Algae that can choke the life out of standing water and disease producing pests are not able to take root in moving water. Similarly, where there is justice, corruption cannot flourish.

Rolling waters are life giving. Within the waters themselves are fish and plant life. The land along a river or stream teems with life nourished by the waters that seep into the ground to feed the vegetation. And where there is vegetation there is animal life, and where there is animal life there will be human life. So it is with justice. Justice is life

giving. Justice allows people to have what they need to live: adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, education, and medical care.

A flowing stream keeps within the boundaries set for it. Justice does not exceed its boundaries, to do so becomes injustice.

Flowing, rolling water is peaceful. The lulling sound of moving water is soothing to the soul. When people live with justice, there is peace for their souls.

Peace and justice, justice and peace. Two sides of the same coin. Where there is justice there will be peace. Where there is peace, there you will find justice. Amos found neither justice nor peace and so delivered hard words from the Lord to the Israelites.

What might God say to us here at Hatfield Church of the Brethren today?

Just as the ancient Israelites, we live in an affluent nation that shows many signs of moral and social decay. Even though we live in a country that claims to stand for "...liberty and justice for all," do we practice what we preach? In a just nation would children go hungry or live on the streets? In a just nation would the elderly have to choose between heating their homes or taking medications that can save their lives? In a just nation would the native people of that land have to live in substandard conditions, while the government grew wealthy off their land?

Would we want to see the day of the Lord come to the United States today? Probably not! Injustice is practiced in our courts and in law enforcement, through racial and ethnic

profiling, graft, and brutality. There is injustice in our educational system, when not every child has access to a quality education in a safe and nurturing environment. Many people are affected by injustice practiced in our health care system, those who have no medical insurance, those who do not speak English, those whose doctors have left the state to practice where it is less expensive to do so, and those living in areas where hospitals and clinics have had to close their doors. There is even injustice practiced in those systems meant to help those who suffer injustice! Think of the children who have been hurt rather than helped by a system meant to protect them from harm. Think of the elderly who are denied quality care by state and county agencies. It is our most vulnerable who suffer the greatest injustices.

“But what can we do about all this injustice?” you might ask, “What you are talking about is WAY beyond my ability to have any kind of effect.” I agree. Systemic injustice is not something any one person is going to change by themselves overnight. However, we can practice justice in our everyday lives and that is what Jesus asks of us when he said, “love your neighbor as yourself.”

So, how can we practice justice in our everyday lives? (ask for suggestions) It’s simple. Say hello to your neighbor when you see them, don’t pretend they don’t exist. Be as kind and courteous to the sales clerk in the store as you would like them to be to you. Let that driver merge in front of you even though traffic is bumper-to-bumper. Allow the lady with only five items in her cart to go ahead of you in the grocery line, and don’t make a

fuss that your ice cream will melt. Offer to babysit for the single mom down the street so she can go to school or look for work. Visit your elderly uncle who is alone in the nursing home across town, you know, the one no one in the family really liked. Give canned goods to the food bank, even better volunteer to help distribute the food. Become a literacy or English as a second language tutor. Help to start a youth sports league in an underprivileged neighborhood. Speak up when you hear or see a child being abused or bullied. As you can see the list can go on and on...

Do you get the idea? I'm sure you can think of many other ways to practice justice in your corner of the world. Just think what will happen when justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream where we are! We would have no need to fear the coming day of the Lord, because instead of coming to pronounce destruction on us, He would come to us and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Please join me in prayer:

Lord, let your peace flow like a river in this place. Lead us in justice and righteousness for your name's sake. We ask this in the name of Jesus. AMEN

Lynne McMullan Allebach