

Text: The Book of Amos especially Amos 5:14-15; 5:21-24

Justice, Righteousness, and Loving Our Neighbor

During the past year I've preached primarily topical sermon series: stewards of grace, relationships, healthy sexuality, and what it means to be an Anabaptist Christian. Now I've decided to return to a Bible series. But, of course, during each topical series, we've looked closely at the Bible and what it had to say about a particular topic.

When I looked at the lectionary readings for the fall, the Old Testament scriptures intrigued me and I quickly focused on Amos, Habakkuk, Haggai, and Joel. What might these small, ancient prophetic books have to say? Could any of it be relevant to us today?

In the Bible, prophets are not fortune tellers, at least not in the way the writings are sometimes used today.¹ The prophet's job is to speak God's truth in a specific historical situation. To make some predictions about their near future. To warn them of the consequences of their current actions.

They comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. They challenge those in power. Over and over again, the prophets tell the Story – especially the story of the exodus. They remind the people who God is – loving, faithful, and just. They rail against the worship of anything other than God. The prophets hold up God's vision of shalom alive.

The biblical prophets can be categorized in a number of ways: when they lived, where they lived, who they spoke to, or how they expressed God's message. Amos, Habakkuk, Haggai, and Joel are writing prophets. Their words are recorded in books bearing their names. Since the books are relatively short, they're called Minor Prophets. Major and minor labels when applied to prophets refer to length of writings, not necessarily importance of writings.

The four Minor Prophets we'll be looking at in this series – Amos, Habakkuk, Haggai and Joel – come from four different time periods in Israel's history. There's some disagreement about when Joel was written. Although some timelines list him before the others, I'll be talking about him last.

So, today, it's Amos. Rather than reading the entire Book of Amos, we'll watch a summary as presented by The Bible Project.² I've found them helpful in visualizing how a book is structured, how the pieces fit together, and what the major themes are.

(Amos video can be watched at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGgWaPGpGz4>.)

Let's compare the themes of Amos with the current situation in our world. Amos accuses Israel of ignoring the poor, allowing grave injustice, selling the poor into debt slavery, and denying them legal representation. He reminds them of their great calling and great responsibility. Not fulfilling their calling and responsibility leads to great and grave consequences.

This is true today. God continues to condemn those who exploit marginalized people and prosper at their expense.

Amos criticizes Israel's worship. He points out that their worship is disconnected from how they treat people. In fact, they no longer are worshipping God. And worship of anything but God – sex, war, nature – leads to injustice. Real relationship with God will transform a person's relationships with others. True worship is synonymous with doing good, with generosity and justice.

This is true today. Wealth and success can lead to spiritual complacency. Sexual immorality, violence, corruption and idolatry draw hearts away from God.

¹ Marion G. Bontrager, Michele Hershberger, John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story: An Introduction to Biblical Literature*, Workplay Publishing, 2016, pp. 118-123 and Michele Hershberger, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring the Christian Faith & Life*, Herald Press, 2013, pp. 57-59.

² <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/amos/>

Amos calls for justice and righteousness. Righteousness refers to right relationships. It is doing good and treating others with love and generosity. Justice is the actions taken to correct injustice and create righteousness. It is treating people equitably without regard to social differences.

Amos explores the relationship between God's justice and mercy. God is just. God must confront evil. God is merciful. God's long-term purposes are for restoration and a new family.

All of this is true today. God continues to call people to live lives of justice and righteousness. God continues to confront evil. We also must confront evil on God's behalf. And God continues the work of restoration and reconciliation. This is our work as well.

It's not difficult in our current context to look around and find groups and people to point our fingers at. They are exploiting. They are complacent. They are evil. We must also look at ourselves. What am I worshiping? Who am I ignoring or mistreating? How am I perpetuating injustice?

The most familiar verses in Amos come from chapter 5. *Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.*³

*I hate, I despise your festivals, 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 offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*⁴

In our visioning retreat yesterday, it was apparent that we've taken the themes of Amos to heart. As we talked about our purpose, themes of worship, relationships, justice, and loving our neighbor appeared. Our facilitators wrote this statement to sum up the themes they were hearing and to guide the rest of our discussions. *In a broken world in need of healing, our purpose is to worship God, which empowers us to share and live out the unique ways of social justice, peacemaking, and inclusion.* Our brainstorming session generated around fifteen ideas of how to live this out. This list gives us a place from which to start, from which to continue work we've been doing and discern together what to do next.

As I was looking for images from Amos, I came across this statement from William Sloane Coffin. *It is one thing to say with the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like might waters," and quite another to work out the irrigation system.*

One critique of our time together yesterday is that we didn't spend any time talking about what to do next, about working out the irrigation system. Be assured that the church board and I will be looking at these ideas and talking about how to proceed. There is energy and importance attached to things we are already doing and a desire to expand on some of them. I expect that the trustees and worship committee will consider some of the items that would fall under their jurisdiction. It appears that there is energy and importance attached to the idea of learning about and making plans to support local needs, including community resources concerning immigration.

I encourage you to step forward and volunteer if you are willing and able to help with this.

As we continue forward with ideas and activities coming out of our time together yesterday, let us keep in mind the message of Amos. May our worship of God always be true. And may it always lead to justice, righteousness, and loving our neighbor.

³ Amos 5:14-15a, New International Version

⁴ Amos 5:21-24, New International Version