

THE TIME HAS COME; THE TIME IS NOW

Almost 8:1-11

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This is a conversation that happens a few times a year, and whenever it does, it feels like a truly sacred moment. Someone will say to me, “I want to talk to you about how to focus more on my spiritual life,” or “I feel like God is nudging me and I’m trying to listen carefully.” These are conversations in which someone talks to me about their relationship with God. I feel honored to be a part of such an important, intimate and vulnerable sharing, and I feel excited to see what the outcome will be in that person’s life.

But sometimes, the next thing a person says is, “And so I’m going to read the Bible cover to cover.” And when someone says that to me, I want to stand up and scream, “No! Danger!” But instead, I calmly say, “May I make a recommendation about that?” Because the Bible isn’t really meant to be read cover to cover the way you would read a novel or a biography or a history book. If you read it very slowly and carefully, and - I would say - with the aid of a very good commentary, it’s possible, but even then I don’t think it’s the most helpful way to read the Bible.

The Bible is a difficult book. It was put together over a long span of time, written by numerous authors. I don’t believe in trying to “dumb down” the Bible, nor do I think that’s necessary, but I do think it’s helpful to have shortcut ways of understanding and thinking about the Bible. When we look at the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, one of the keys to understanding is the word “covenant” or sacred promise. God promises to give the Hebrew people a homeland and God promises to be with them: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” God gives them an identity. But a covenant is two-way. The people of Israel are to live according to God’s laws, the most important

of which is neighborliness - care for the stranger, the poor, the one in need, the most vulnerable, the widow, the orphan. One way to read a good portion of the Old Testament is simply as a dialogue between God and the people of Israel. God reminds the people of the sacred promise, time and again. When the people forget, when they act as if they have no responsibility towards one another, God reminds them. God sends prophets to serve as messengers, to say to the people, "You're forgetting who you are and who God has called you to be. You're forgetting what it means to live in sacred community with one another. If you continue forgetting, this entire covenant relationship will fall apart." It's not that God is going to be vengeful and punishing. It's not that simple. God doesn't withhold from people to teach people a lesson. It's more that God has created our lives to work according to these principles - we are to look after each other, and in that way we keep knitting and re-knitting a web of caring and support, a fabric that holds all of us together. If that safety net falls apart, we have lost the kind of social network God intends for us. It's not so much a punishment as a natural consequence.

Amos is one of the prophets God sends. Our men's prayer group read this passage on Monday morning and several of them said to me, "You're going to preach on Amos?" It's an unfamiliar book of the Bible to many Christians, but there is one passage you may have heard before. If you've heard any part of Amos, it's probably this section from chapter 5, where Amos is criticizing people who think that they're pleasing God by going through the motions of religion - keeping up with their attendance at worship, bringing their offerings, but not living what they profess. I'll read a few verses from chapter 5: "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.” That verse is probably the most famous and eloquent of Amos’ writings.

Amos does not mince words. He tries to get through to the people of Israel. He doesn’t hold back. He’s passionate about wanting them to change, to return to the ways of the covenant. He looks around at the world he’s living in and he doesn’t like what he sees. He’s sickened by the injustice and corruption and he knows that people can do better. To get people’s attention, he first describes the problem in graphic detail. Here’s how Eugene Peterson puts our passage for today in the Message version of the Bible:

Listen to this, you who walk all over the weak,
you who treat poor people as less than nothing,
Who say, “When’s my next paycheck coming
so I can go out and live it up?
How long till the weekend
when I can go out and have a good time?”
Who give little and take much,
and never do an honest day’s work.
You exploit the poor, using them—
and then, when they’re used up, you discard them.

⁷⁻⁸ God swears against the arrogance of Jacob:

“I’m keeping track of their every last sin.”
God’s oath will shake earth’s foundations,
dissolve the whole world into tears.

In other words, Amos says, the world is falling apart. And much of it has to do with human behavior, with the failure to live in a neighborly fashion.

One biblical commentator explains Amos this way: “When injustice has become normalized, and people have become accustomed to it, it’s no longer possible to imagine God’s justice. So the prophet’s job is to make the people sufficiently outraged so that the words of justice can be heard.” The prophet’s job is to wake people up, remind them of who they are, remind them of God’s words, remind them of God’s vision of a world of neighborliness.

The leaders of Amos’ time had clearly abused their power in order to benefit themselves, while the poor in the community were ignored. The greed of the powerful was so complete that they could not wait until the Sabbath was over so that they could resume the business of ripping off those with few choices and even fewer resources. Isn’t it fascinating how words written almost 3000 years ago can sound so eerily relevant today?

So a few people from the men’s prayer group contacted me this week and said to me, “Kelly, what are you going to say about those words from Amos? He’s so angry!” And it’s not just Amos who’s angry in this passage. God is also angry. Amos is speaking for God; that’s what prophets do.

I have two responses to this word from holy scripture. One is this, and it seems unavoidable. People who believe in the values of neighborliness are to be morally outraged when neighborliness is violated. People who believe in the covenant, the sacred promises of the Bible, are sometimes called to anger, to holy righteous anger. It is anger and outrage which motivate us out of our complacency and towards action.

It seems obvious that we are living in a world where the needs of the poor and the needy are trampled upon, and where the wants and desires of the rich and powerful are given top priority. This is not a partisan statement or a partisan issue. People of different political opinions may differ on the solutions, but we can all agree that the way we are living, the way we are treating one another, is far from what God intends.

Our hearts are breaking open as we see the situations at the border, the human stories of families separated. Their suffering is almost incomprehensible. And it is not the only suffering taking place in our nation; some of it is much closer to home.

A parishioner recommended to me that I read a book called Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America. It is a book of stories and photos from America's forgotten towns, towns like Gary, Indiana and Portsmouth, Ohio where there are no longer jobs but there are still people. People try to create community by gathering together at McDonalds where there is free wifi, and in churches where they find a glimmer of hope. But these people mostly see life as bleak, so bleak that death isn't terrifying. The author, Chris Arnade, writes this, "Their belief that life isn't worth living has turned into recklessness, their addiction into a form of suicide." These stories, too, break our hearts wide open.

If we are human, we are outraged and angry and broken-hearted at the injustices in our world.

My second response to Amos is from the last verse Beau read today - it's actually the verse that first grabbed me when I decided to preach on this passage...Amos says that there will come a time when there will be a hunger and thirst for hearing the words of the Lord. I believe that time has come again. I sense that there is a desperation for

words from God...words of hope, courage, and inspiration. I sense that there is a hunger and a thirst, even a famine, to quote Amos - a desperate desire for true leadership. Not for leaders that lob accusations at each other, but leaders who find a way to compromise and work for solutions. Not for leaders who divide us further, but for leaders who help move all of us forward.

As I talk with parents of young children, I hear a longing for them to have role models for their children, people who will teach their children values, people who will model for them the way that people of integrity and character live. We are living in a time when there is a hunger and thirst for real heroes and heroines. The great spiritual writer Richard Rohr says this: [There is a lot of talk now about heroes; super-hero movies are popular...but...] A “hero” now is largely about being bold, muscular, rich, famous, talented or ‘fantastic’ by himself, and often FOR himself, whereas the classic hero is one who ‘goes the distance,’ whatever that takes, and then has plenty left over for others. True heroism serves the common good, or it is not really heroism at all.”

Wednesday night, here in this sanctuary, we showed the film entitled, “Labyrinth,” a film written and produced by 17 students at the all-male St. Edward High School, documenting the stories of women who have been victims of sexual harassment and violence. One of our own high school students raised his hand afterwards and asked the film teacher, “What is it that we can do about this problem? It is so disheartening when we see so much wrongdoing in the news. So many of the rich and famous engage in this kind of behavior. How are we supposed to make a difference?” In other words, he was saying, “There is a famine for leadership, for wisdom, for heroes and heroines, for good examples, for role models.” “There is a hunger and thirst for words and stories of hope

and courage.” I was sitting up here, next to the teacher from St. Ed’s, and I wondered how he would respond to that excellent, heartfelt question. I was trying to think on my feet because I thought that perhaps he would toss the question my way...but he didn’t. Instead he answered thoughtfully and perfectly. He said, “It’s up to you. It’s up to me. It’s up to all of us. A thousand, ten thousand people trying to do the right thing, day after day, time after time, this is what changes the world...”

What do we do once we’ve heard the prophet’s words? Once we are awakened to the sad reality, the fact that we are living in a time when people have stopped being neighborly, when we are so far away from the network of love and compassion for which God created us? We do the next right thing, day after day. We do just what we’re doing here today - gathering in community, signing up for the Weekend of Service, serving as mentors to our youth, purchasing school clothes for those who are in need, providing food for school children during the summer. Through all of this, our church is trying to practice neighborliness. Several adults in our congregation took a week’s vacation from work last week - some to volunteer at Vacation Bible School and some to chaperone the junior high mission trip. They are our leaders, our mentors, our role models. We may be living in a time when we need to be that for each other. It doesn’t mean we’re perfect. But we are here, trying to do the next right thing, day after day, time after time. And this IS what will change the world.

Let us pray.

Holy God, awaken us to the needs of our neighbors, especially those who are most vulnerable. Let us respond with hope, courage, and generosity. In Jesus’ name. Amen.