

November 12, 2017 - Narrative Lectionary – Year 4, Week 10

“*Prophetic Consciousness: An Ever-Flowing Stream*” – Rev. Seth Jones ©

Scripture: Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 20-24

In the same way a baby grows through different stages of development into adulthood, so also our souls move through different stages of awareness and consciousness. We began in September by developing an awareness of God’s creation. There, we saw that God’s good, relational, and creative way is evident in Creation, and aligning ourselves with that good, relational, and creative way is also an alignment with God’s desires for each of us. Then we reflected on what it means to be called by God, because once we have aligned ourselves with the ways of God, we become open to hearing what God wishes for us. We begin to develop a sensitivity, a taste, a consciousness of God’s call upon us. Once that call has been received, and we begin to speak from that alignment and call, we are speaking prophetically. And so this week we are beginning a short look at what it means to inhabit a Prophetic Consciousness.

Which brings us to Amos, who has the reputation of being the prophet of justice and righteousness. Amos lived around 760 BCE, and he lived in a divided, polarized, conflicted time. The kingdom of Israel was divided between Judah and Israel. Power struggles, territorial skirmishes, and threats from the outside were a constant reality. Into this miasma, Amos is called to bring God’s word to the northern kingdom of Israel. The word is harsh, radical, and powerful. As one teacher at Luther Seminary puts it:

“if you like Amos, you probably don’t understand him.”

The question is, then - beyond our deeper understanding of the history of Israel and what the prophetic has to do with Jesus - *what does this have to do with us today?*

It is a good question to govern our reading of any part of Scripture. Sometimes, the power of the prophetic transcends history and becomes relevant at any point in history, because God’s call to faith and care of God’s people and creation is always true. And sometimes, the history that is happening today resonates like a tuning fork with what has happened before.

The Prophet Amos was extended into our daily lives in America by Martin Luther King, Jr, who used the last verse of our reading today regularly. He would often end his speeches about civil rights by saying:

Let justice roll down like waters, and let righteousness flow like a mighty stream.

Martin Luther King changes the last part of the verse from ‘ever-flowing stream’ to ‘a mighty stream’. He knew this was a reasonable translation from the Hebrew. More so, Martin Luther King knew that an “*ever-flowing stream*” was sort of a meaningless phrase for people in the deep South, who often lived along the flood plains of large rolling rivers. If you live in the desert and hear a prophet speak about ‘*ever-flowing streams*’, there is a very different meaning than if you live by the Mississippi River and hear the phrase ‘*a mighty stream*’. In both circumstances, though, the phrase speaks to the destructive ability of flowing to wash away the dust and detritus of drought, and the living ability to saturate the ground with life-giving waters for new growth. Martin Luther King changed the phrase to fit the context of the people to whom he was speaking. The prophetic voice of God can move through 2700 years of history and still be useful, still be transformative.

Maya Lin, the sculptor who built the Civil Rights Memorial in Washington DC to honor those who died in the Civil Rights movement, etched these words of Amos into the granite that opens the memorial and kept MLK's phrasing. But the memorial itself embodies the '*ever-flowing stream*' of the historic translation in order to suggest that the struggle for freedom is ongoing. The prophetic voice moves continually through history. The phrase was also the last public thing MLK said before he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

What were Martin Luther King, Jr, Malcolm X, who was assassinated on February 5, 1965, and all the other freedom fighters looking for in the Civil Rights movement? They were looking for *justice and righteousness*, the same concerns which Amos spoke about those many years ago.

Amos was dealing with people who worshipped in one way and did something else out in the world. Justice and righteousness rise to the surface as a concern when things are so out of alignment with God's desires that injustice and unrighteousness must be called out by and on behalf of those who have been run over by those with power. How much worse is the situation when those with power use their faith to justify the injustice they inflict on others. This is why God, in verses 21 & 22, hates and despises the festivals and rites of the people. There is no congruity between God's commandments and the actions of God's people.

My struggle with Amos, when I read him is answering the question: *WHAT IS JUSTICE in our day and age?* What does righteousness, which I define as "*aligning oneself with the goodness and graciousness of God*", mean today?

The equation is easy to state – God's justice and righteousness are intended for all people at all times in all places. The implementation and the waiting to see God's justice is what makes this difficult. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "*The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice*".

The waiting, the implementation, the inability to see God's justice and righteousness is complicated by another layer, which makes the prophetic call to God's justice and righteousness especially hard. Amos is speaking to believers, followers of God. What makes this very difficult is that *we want to believe someone else is doing the injustice and unrighteousness, not us*. We don't want to believe we are the ones being judged by the prophet of God.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on what Amos and God are upset about. Back in chapter 2, Amos lists what the people of God are doing.

Beginning with **verse 6**, we see that Israel is selling people for silver and sandals.

In **verse 7**, the wealthy crush the poor into dust and do not care for the sick in their neighborhoods.

Fathers and sons participate in prostituting women and girls.

In **verse 8**, the rich misuse the pledges of the poor for their own benefit. Often, the poor would give the rich something like a deposit, a pledge, when they would do work for the day. The most common thing to give as a deposit or pledge was one's cloak off one's back. In Deuteronomy, God commands that the pledge of the poor must be returned by nightfall, because a cloak was used as blanket and mattress by them.

Here, the rich don't even care. They even sleep in front of the altar of God in the very cloaks they have not returned to the poor.

Even worse, with the riches from inordinate fines imposed upon the poor, the wealthy buy wine and drink it.

During the liberation movements in Central America back in the 1970s and 80s, the theologians down there used to talk about '*God's preferential option for the poor*'. They got that phrase from Amos. What inspires God's anger, and what inspires the prophets to speak out is when the people of God lord it over the poor, the widow, and the orphan. In the civil rights movement, and in Central and South America, the prophetic awareness moved through history and transformed the world.

The recurring theme through Amos is "*Hate evil and choose the good so that you may live.*" When Amos says this, and when we hear it, we are meant to hear that the things God sees as good are the things we must see as good also, and the things that are evil in the eyes of God must be evil in ours as well.

Take a moment here, then, and let's think about our economic choices and political alliances. *How do our political beliefs and economic choices allow people to live and thrive?* How does justice and righteousness extend to "**those**" people.

How do we provide help for those who are unable to get a leg up in the community: to find housing, food, meaningful work?

Does our political view, our attitude, or the systems we participate in continue to keep them down?

How are we prostituting the young, forcing them into ways of learning, working, and being in our communities in such a way that they lose the ability to see what the Good is?

How are we taking advantage of the work of the poor in such a way that the rich are continually benefited and then justify the behavior with a long-dead version of work and economy which no longer applies in the 21st century?

Did you know that just 3 people own 50% of the wealth of this country? Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett are worth what half the country earns and has. Does that seem right to you? What would Amos have to say about that?

Whenever I think about crime and imprisonment in America, I try to ask the journalist question: Who is making money from this? Did you know that since 2000, the courts in America have expanded loopholes to allow police to seize assets during a search whether charges are brought or not? The police do not have to return the assets and can keep them for whatever purpose they desire. Then court fines are imposed that people can't pay, which extends the length of their incarceration, and essentially turns our jails into debtors' prisons. Isn't this what Amos is referring to when he condemns the wealthy for buying wine at the expense of the poor?

This stuff goes deep.

You may say, "*You, Pastor, are reading too much into Amos.*"

But the prophetic consciousness does not see things that way.

The prophetic consciousness presses into history and awakens people who have been pushed down and crushed into dust in such a way that they know they can lay claim also to the promises and hopes of God. This is the mighty stream of the Lord through history. Those waters roll down in such a way that those upon whom they fall rigorously deconstruct the systems and thinking that are radically misaligned with God's hopes and dreams for all people.

"Seek good and not evil so you may live", Amos the Prophet tells us. What does it mean when we think we're seeking the good and evil is still happening? Amos is speaking to people who believe in God. God's focus is, in Amos, is those who are poor, downtrodden, excluded, those who are seeking the goodness of God.

So, if we feel judged and excluded by the prophetic awareness to which Amos calls us, a call for people who have been excluded and judged and who are seeking the same freedom, rights, and justice that we have access to, then maybe we are the ones judging and excluding, not God or God's prophets.

When our actions, laws, governments, and behavior bear fruit that do not lead to the thriving of life, maybe that is an indicator that we're not actually seeking good and hating evil.

Maybe you hold a very low opinion of people in the Black Lives Matter, and therefore fail to see the call for justice which is the foundation for the movement?

Maybe the issues regarding gay, lesbian, transgender, queer rights are an assault on your personal tastes or sensibilities, clouding the prophetic call to shared rights they also deserve.

Perhaps you judge harshly the ex-military person who lives down the street and has a gun collection, in such a way that your neighbor is now perceived as an enemy, an enemy the prophets call you into relationship with.

Perhaps you feel that, because you made it on your own and are financially comfortable, everyone should be able to "make it on their own", forgetting that the freedoms available to you may not be available to them.

When people are not included in the justice and righteousness of God, they become impoverished - literally and spiritually. So how, in places of racism, sexism, human trafficking, prejudice, discrimination, how will we become rolling waters and ever flowing streams for them?

You can see how God's righteousness and justice is not some nice thing to say from the pulpit but is instead a difficult and challenging prophecy when it gets out into the world.

Into this world, today, comes the difficult words of a prophet who has aligned himself with God's creation and heard God's call and is now speaking God's words, saying, wherever he goes, *"for three transgressions and for four, this is your punishment."*

Hate evil and love good and establish justice.

For us, as followers of Christ, we've been given the prophetic gift of the Holy Spirit and through Christ we've been aligned in our baptism to God's good, relational, creative creation.

We have the prophetic call to seek the good and establish justice and righteousness, but we have to be willing to become channels for God's rolling waters and mighty streams in the world.

Jesus says in John 7:37-38, *‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’*

We become the justice and righteousness of God through the waters of faith. Our relationship with Christ is a prophetic word to the world and to you and me this very day. The voice of the prophets move through the ages and, as it moves, the justice and righteousness of God expands and more and more people become enfolded into that flowing embrace, that mighty promise and hope.

May it be so for all who seek freedom, independence, and the flowing, living, mighty, ever-flowing life of God.

Amen.