

Amos: The Party is Over

Sermon 3-14-18

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Amos 1:1-2

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake. ²And he said: The LORD roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.

Message:

(Play video at <https://youtu.be/mGgWaPGpGz4>) Did you catch all that? That's just a brief overview of the book of Amos. If you've never studied Amos, it comes during the divided kingdom period. Judah and Jerusalem as the Southern Kingdom. Israel and Bethel as the Northern Kingdom. As the video illustrated, Amos is called from the Southern Kingdom by God to deliver this message to the Northern Kingdom, Israel. And if you peeked at Amos this past week, or if you read it in the coming weeks, you'll notice that it's not a very hopeful book. The only glimmer of hope comes at the end of Amos which we will study later in this series. So if you're looking for something uplifting in Amos, you won't find it. And it's probably why many of us know very little about Amos, including myself. We probably avoid it. I chose to do this series because I knew that it would stretch me. It would stretch my knowledge of Amos. It would stretch my understanding of God. And I hope that you experience the same as we explore this book and the words of the prophet.

We learn in the first verse that Amos is a shepherd. So he's not a scholar. He's not a priest. He's not royalty. Amos is among the lowly of Judah as a shepherd. And yet God calls him to speak these words of truth. Later in verse one, we learn that these words from Amos were not originally heeded or taken seriously. This is evident by the words, "...two years before the earthquake." Someone narrated the beginning of this book after Amos gave his prophecy. So the words that we are about to dive into are words that he delivered and the people then pointed back to Amos' words and essentially said, "Amos was right. He wasn't just a babler. The Lord was speaking to us through him." This earthquake must have been pretty devastating. To the point where people were asking, "Why did this happen to us?" Or as some of us may ask today, "Why did God let this happen to us?" And the people turned to Amos' prophecy for explanation.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of the Israelites for a moment. Imagine that you think everything is fine, if you're part of the wealthy and elite. If you're among the poor or lowly professions, you realize that you are getting the bad end of the stick. You're being treated unfairly and were taken advantage of. And then this guy, Amos, comes along and provides this prophecy. The religious and wealthy elite aren't going to like Amos' words because it means devastation, judgment and despair. Who's going to like that? Who is going to say, "Thanks God!?" Certainly not the religious and wealthy elite. Now, the least of these, might take some solace in these words from Amos. They may say, "Finally, God is going to set these people straight." But they may also reject these words from Amos, because if the wealthy and religious elite are punished and they fall, then it also most likely means that they will suffer as well. So on the first hearing of the words of Amos, no one is going to be happy. No one is going to like what they hear.

In verse 2, Amos says, "The LORD roars from Zion..." This is no triumphant or victorious roar. The Lord is angry. "...and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up." Imagine if you're a shepherd. You make your living on raising and profiting off of sheep. What if the sheep don't have any grass to eat? Your sheep will eventually starve and die. And because you don't have your lively hood, you will eventually starve and die if you don't find another profession or trade. The reference to Carmel is a place that is typically lush with fertility. In all of Israel, if you struggled to feed your sheep, you went to Carmel and you knew you would find food for your sheep there. It was a given. And yet, God is saying through Amos, "The party is over." For many years, the Israelites benefited from God's generosity. He led them out of the wilderness to defeat the Ammonites and the Moabites and to eventually conquer the promise land. The land that was promised and fulfilled to be the land full of milk and honey. And Israel was such a fertile place. God built them a home and a kingdom. God brought them great kings in David and Solomon. But what happened after so long? The people got used to the high life. Especially the wealthy and religious elite. It became an assumption to have this wealth and privilege. Instead of extending kindness, mercy, compassion and generosity to the crippled and the poor, they took advantage of them. Instead of feeding the stranger, giving clean water to the weak and thirsty and aiding the beaten on the side of the road, they chose to turn a blind eye. To ignore those in need. They demanded more taxes to maintain the high life style. They took the first fruits of the fields before the common people. They made families prostitute their children and send some into slavery. Some were living the high life and loving it. And God is saying through Amos, "Enough!" He has turned a blind eye

to these sins and transgressions for too long. And He will no longer do so. Even later in Amos you will see that sacrifice and worship is no longer pleasing to God. No longer will God forgive with their sacrifice because when they don't love their neighbor or the least of these, then they don't love God. Worship doesn't matter to God when you ignore those in need around you. It's vain worship.

As you will see in the coming chapters, Amos is passing God's words of judgment and punishment onto the people of Israel. To be honest, these words make me feel uncomfortable. And I'm sure they do for you as well. It's for a host of reasons that this makes me feel uncomfortable. I will confess that I am a recovering perfectionist. It pains me to admit that. But I can be a perfectionist. I do well for a while and then I relapse. If things aren't juuuuust right, then I'm not happy. And when a perfectionist, like myself, is criticized or their flaws are exposed, it's devastating. My world comes crashing down for a little while. It's hard for us to accept our flaws. On one level, we all have flaws. None of us is perfect. But then the thing God is addressing through Amos is sin. Sin is on a whole other level than flaws. Sin is a transgression against God. If having our flaws exposed, hurts, having our sins exposed hurts even more. And the Lord is exposing the sins of Israel through Amos. They may have gotten away with these sins for a long time. And the Lord is giving judgment for those sins. No longer is God asking for sacrifices to forgive the sins of the people because the people are no longer listening for ways in which they have transgressed against God. Their actions are not changing. How can they sacrifice when they don't listen to what they did wrong? The earthquake seems to wake them up to the Lord's words through Amos. That God's judgment has come. The party is over.

When I think about a parallel from Amos to today, the most obvious issue is the decline of the church in America. As I've stated in a previous sermon, I know nothing of the "glory days" of the church. Some of you remember when churches were packed full of people and the activity of the church in our society abounded. Political action first heeded the thoughts of the church. No one dared to schedule events on a Sunday because it was reserved for church life and fellowship with friends and family. I have never known these things in my lifetime. I'm too young to recall the so called, "glory days" of the church. All I have ever known is the church in decline. Now, we all search for explanations, like Israelites, of how this all happened. How did we get to this place? How did Providence get to this place? And the explanations abound. "It's society. If society would just get their act together, we would be back to normal." "It's those millennials. If they would just get off their phones and Netflix, they would see how valuable church life is." "It's the government. If the government were more Christian, then we could legislate Christian values." But what if...I hate to ask this question because it's a painful one to ask, what if the church in decline is our fault? What if the church in

decline is our fault? It's the last place we want to look. We would rather blame everything else before we look at ourselves. And as you will see when we explore more of Amos, the people rejected His words because they didn't want to believe that they were at fault. They didn't want to believe that they broke the covenant with God. It wasn't who broke the covenant with the people. They didn't want to believe that they sinned. They didn't want to believe that they did anything wrong.

One of the biggest internal struggles of the book of Amos is that the Lord talks about the end of the Israelites, but doesn't talk about what's next. At least until the end of the book. Isn't that a terrifying thought and feeling for many of us? When we know that something is coming to an end and we don't know what's next? It scares the crap out of me. I like to have a plan. If I'm going to admit to my flaws and even more so, my sin, today, what's going to happen tomorrow? We often ask for God to reveal His plan for us. If the church is ending, what's next? And God makes no promise to reveal to us all that He has planned. If we know some of that plan, we should count ourselves privileged. I know for me, if God reveals the 15 step plan, I'm ready to jump to step 14 or 15, when God just wants me to take step 2. As you'll find out later in our Congregational Business Meeting, we're going to reveal what the Elders and I believe God is calling Providence into next. And in some regards, it's terrifying and it's also exciting and an adventure. We don't know exactly what step 15 is going to look like. But we sense that God is calling us to be faithful to step 2. Maybe even just step 1. And this vision isn't a Providence sized vision. It's not just about us and our survival. We believe it is a Kingdom-sized vision. A God-given vision. Your job first and foremost is to, "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." To be faithful to the Lord and what He has in store for us.

³⁹And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." As the book of Amos will point out over and over again, if we don't love neighbor, then, by default, we don't love God. If we don't love the poor and the destitute among us, then we don't love God.

For many of us we want to jump to God's reformation. God's restoration. We want to jump to the positive stuff. We want to jump to forgiveness and reconciliation. But, here's the thing, we can't be re-formed, if we aren't broken. We can't be forgiven, if we can't acknowledge our sin. We can't be reconciled if we don't believe we have done anything wrong. What I believe the book of Amos is going to invite us into is to acknowledge our brokenness. Because God can't do anything with us, until we get on our knees and admit our sin, our brokenness and our wrongdoing. If we can't admit how we have ignored loving our neighbor, God can't bring you into loving relationship with your neighbor. If you can't ask for forgiveness from God, then you won't be able to extend forgiveness to others. If

you can't admit that you deserve God's judgment for your sins, then you can't know God's mercy. If you can't admit to your grief, then you can't know the joy of the Lord.

If you're looking for Good News today, we know the Good News in Jesus Christ. Amos didn't know that Jesus was going to come. So if we are looking beyond the book of Amos, we know that we deserve judgment. We know that we deserve to be punished for our sins. We know that we are at fault. We know that we are broken and nothing without our Lord Jesus Christ. And because we know these things and confess our brokenness and sins, we can experience the mercy and grace of God through our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. But we can't know this salvation, if we can't accept our brokenness and the judgment we deserve. You can't skip to salvation. It will be meaningless if you choose to do so. There are no shortcuts. Our God is a benevolent God. Our God is a good God. But He can't stand evil. He can't stand sin. But the Good News is that our Lord Jesus Christ paid it all. Through Jesus, God wants to heal you. Through Jesus, God wants to restore you. Through Jesus, God wants to free you from the imprisonment of your guilt. Through Jesus, God wants to lead you back to Him. Even though we deserve judgment and the church in decline may be our fault, our God is a good God. Our God will not die with the church. Our Jesus will reign forever and forever. Our Jesus is the light of the world. Our Jesus is our savior from judgment and sin. Praise be to God for bringing Jesus Christ to us. Praise be to God that even when the end is near, when the party is over, when it's too late and we don't know what's next, He does. Praise be to God for His mercy and grace in the face of deserved judgment. Praise be to God that even when we are unfaithful, He is faithful to us through His son, Jesus Christ. Amen.