

According to the beginning of the book of Amos, Amos prophesied during the reigns of King Uzziah and King Jeroboam II, dating Amos to around 760-750 bc. At this point in time the people of Israel were deeply divided. So divided, in fact, Israel was split into two kingdoms, the north, still called Israel, and the south, called Judah. Amos was from the southern kingdom, and called by God to preach to the northern kingdom. Most of the prophets preached to the south, but Amos and Hosea preached to the northern kingdom and may have known each other or at least been aware of each other.

Israel was in a time of peace following a bloody war with Syria, and the borders of the kingdom almost reached what they had been under King David. Israel now had control of important trade routes and was doing quite well for itself. This had allowed for a class of wealthy merchants to rise. This time of trade and prosperity was changing the countryside into towns and cities instead of farming communities. For many it was a time of prosperity. Some, however, took their blessings and became greedy and cruel to others in their society, all while still keeping up with Jewish rituals, and seeing this breakdown of the community broke God's heart.

Amos is not a condemnation of those who prosper. Amos himself is believed to have been a well off farmer, who probably traded in Israel. Nor is Amos a call to empty the storehouses of the wealthy. What God is concerned with, however, is the cruel treatment of others, the rampant injustice, hearts that loved evil instead of good, and the deep hypocrisy of those who acted religious in many ways while trampling the poor. God laments how God's children are treating one another. God watches as people are personally observant, performing all the right rituals and sacrifices, but then treat one another terribly. They are hypocrites, outstanding citizens on the outside, and greedy and cruel on the inside.

Amos speaks to these outwardly religious and wealthy Israelites. You trample the poor, you exact taxes of grain. You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. These people would give sacrifices, would pray, would tithe, all the while their faith never touched their heart. They went through the motions while conducting themselves as though they had no faith when it came to one another. Amos is not condemning honest business, but the detestable and greedy practices of the

wealthy Israelites. Landowners of the time could use their wealth to manipulate the law, gaining ownership of farms, and then requiring the farmer to pay exorbitant rent to stay on land that was rightfully his. Bribes were given and received. Those who were hurt the most were those who were too honest or too poor to try and bribe the courts back into their favor, all the while the wealthy were doing all the things, outwardly, that the law required of them.

But the God that made Pleiades and Orion, the God that set the sun in its course, the God that controls the very ocean, sees all that is being done, not just the things that God wants to see. The Lord is not swayed by sacrifices and incense, The Lord can't be bought with all the wine and grain and coins. The Lord cares about how God's people conduct themselves in society, as well as in their own hearts. Hear the lament as God lists the crimes of the people, of the courts God wants to be a source of refuge and fairness turned to instruments of terror, as people's lands are swindled and they are taxed until they are broken, how every avenue for help has become a place of manipulation for senseless gain by people who claim to follow God.

God will not allow this to continue. The people of Israel established a community devoid of God and the principles of their faith, and God warns them clearly that if they continue in their ways, they will fall to invaders and other calamities. But God is so in love with God's people, both the aggressors and the victims of this prophecy, that God begs them to turn back to God. Not with sacrifices and more rituals, the people already did that. They were already outwardly religious, at least in so far as they followed the rituals of the law. God begs them to turn their hearts back to good. Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. You say you follow God, and God is with you, turn your hearts so that will really be true. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate.

The people aren't to just follow the rituals, they are to seek good, to love good. They are to change their actions and their hearts. They are not just to do good to their neighbors, though, that would be a start, they were to love their neighbors, to love good so much that it radically changes their hearts and their actions, not just in their private lives, but also in how they engaged with each in all of their dealings. It was not enough to go to synagogue, to let their coins jingle into the offering box, and then treat each other with complete disregard.

Consider how Israel looked to the surrounding countries, a nation who claimed God's special favor and had many moral rules and rights that were practically unheard of in the ancient world, but in reality took advantage of the least among them. God has always longed to gather all people into God's fold, but I imagine that the gentiles were not particularly drawn to this God so poorly represented by the broken community Amos preaches to.

We are pretty far removed from Amos, but I'd say we have some striking similarities. Our people are deeply divided on just about every issue. We've enjoyed a lot of growth and prosperity following conflicts, and the way we treat one another is certainly not up to God's standards. We may not all agree on the details, we may not all agree on the solutions, but I'm willing to bet we could all agree people aren't treating each other as well as they could be. A quick trip through Facebook, tiktok, or even just the evening news confirms this. Sadly, a lot of the people who disregard their brothers and sisters are outwardly religious.

But Amos calls us to a different way. Amos reminds us that God cares deeply about how we treat one another, and about how we arrange our communities and relationships. The wealthy class of Israel was often doing things which were legal, or at least in a gray area, but were morally wrong. God's standards are higher, however. God wanted them to seek good, to love good, and if they had, they were have chosen that which was morally right, even if legally permissible.

Going to church, giving to charity, are all wonderful things, but if we do not seek and love the good with all our hearts, we are falling short of our calling. If we treat each other poorly, even if permissible in our culture, we are falling short of our calling. If we order our communities and relationships unfairly, for personal gain, we are falling short of our calling. Worst of all, we may be the stumbling for another who is seeking God, if they see that our hearts do not match our words.

Now, as some you may know, I'm a Christian pastor. My best friend, as in the person who has been present in all of major life events for the past many years, however, is an out and out atheist. Now, we're close enough that we can discuss just about any issue civilly. Even politics and religion, because we love and respect each other and also, we find that if we start from the assumption that each of us holds our beliefs sincerely and without any sinister motive, that we can talk about anything. Over the years we've talked

about religion many times. She is well aware of why I am a Christian, and I've come to understand her reasoning for being an atheist.

Most people tend to assume it's something to do science, evolution, or something. But that's not it. It has nothing to do with the finer points of theology or concepts of biblical inerrancy. It has to do with wounds inflicted by people who were front pew witnesses on Sunday, and treated others unjustly and cruelly Monday. She told me about people who stood up on Sundays, but who lied, cheated, and took advantage of others. She told me about the hypocrisy she has witnessed, and how poorly she has seen people treat one another, and that has made all the difference, and it breaks my heart. And as I've told her, these things break God's heart, too. The Lord laments how she and others have been mistreated, as much today as God did then.

Sometimes, the damage is even unintentional, when people so caught up in the letter of the law forgot the heart of it, when well-meaning Christians forgot that God loves my atheist best friend as much as God loves the most devout of Christians. God cares how we treat one another, because God loves each and every one of us.

We may not be wealthy merchants bribing courts to swindle small farms, at least I really hope not, but every day, every moment, we are witnessing to the Gospel as we engage with others in our community. The words of Amos should prompt us to ask ourselves if the way in which we are conducting ourselves is consistent with our faith. Are we seeking the good with our interactions? Do we need to put a Christian fish on our billboard, or will our customers know we are Christians by how fairly and kindly we treat them? Do people know that we are Christians when we leave this sanctuary? And if people know we are Christians, are we attracting them or pushing them away by the way we treat one another?

This prophesy of Amos reminds us that God wants our hearts to match our lips. God cares about the state of our hearts, and God cares how we treat each other. We are God's beloved people called to love good, love God and love our neighbors. May we strive never to be a stumbling block to a seeker, or the source of the Lord's lament. With God's help may we always seek the good in all things, and may our lives reflect the faith that we confess with our lips, that through us others may come to know the God that made Pleiades and Orion, and God's people by their love.

Rev. Kate Mauch, October 10, 2021