

Preaching

word & witness

PROPER 21 • SEP 30, 2007 • VOL. 07:5 (YEAR C)

Scriptures

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 or
Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

Commentary

No one says it better than Amos! It is no wonder that African-Americans during slavery time and segregation often named their sons Amos. The white master and mistress may have been lounging in the Big House today, but, down in the slave quarters, the children of Lazarus sang their own future: *Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham!* Many a black preacher has been inspired by the cry of Amos in this pericope: “Alas for those who are at ease in Zion!”

How can we make the process of history and the role of the prophet – past and present – come alive for our people? Reading from Amos is a chance to do that. Many people suffer from the misconception of the Old Testament prophet as fortune-teller rather than truth-teller. That misconception is a primary source of unhealthy theology in the present.

My congregation always compliments me when I ground the text historically. They have a real hunger to understand the historical context of the Bible. It helps them transport the Good News from Scripture into their own lives. I notice that I often take my seminary training in historical and literary criticism for granted and forget to

share it. In fact, some of my old professors, left over from the Victorian era, taught that “the people in the pews” were not capable of understanding what we were learning in seminary. But today, everyone is getting the secular interpretation of Scripture from the History Channel and *Newsweek*, and the people in the pews yearn to hear a sophisticated faith-based interpretation of how the Spirit works through what was once called “higher criticism.”

I joke with my congregation – frequently – that I only ask them to memorize two dates: 586 BC and AD 70. Next I add “the eighth-century prophets” as a third minimal hook on which to hang our understanding of Scripture and theology. We still face anti-Semitism in the church, often expressed in the folk-creed, “Judaism is about law and Christianity is about grace.” The eighth-century prophets can act as a corrective, lift up justice, and give us insight into the Jewish theology of Jesus.

Amos is the first of the eighth-century prophets, and his prophetic proclamations were the first to be written down and preserved in a distinct book that bore his name. He made quite an impact. Why?

There are so many parallels between religion and society in eighth-century Israel and in twenty-first-century America. Is there an official national theology in our country today? Do we have a counterpart to Amaziah, the official theologian of the ruling party (7:10ff)? In 2006 there was a 43 percent

increase over 2005 in the number of home mortgage foreclosures. “They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals – they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way, and so my holy name is profaned” (2:6-7). Today homelessness grows while Katie Couric’s salary is \$13 million a year. “The cows of Bashan” indeed! (4:1)

But all of Amos’ protests are a setup. There is Good News (5:6) in his proclamation, “Seek the LORD and live!”

At times, Jesus used Amos and the other prophets as role models. His parable of Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16:19-31) is a case in point. Can we, in good conscience, not preach on class and economic justice given these pericopes? Back to our anti-Jewish prejudices, what is the theology of salvation that Jesus presents here? Finally, is there any hope for us?

Perhaps Psalm 146 and our passage from 1 Timothy hold out the hope. Happy are those who do not put their trust in princes, but whose hope is in the LORD their God, who executes justice for the oppressed and feeds the hungry.” Although the epistle tells us that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,” there is a psychological sense in the passage as a whole that greed is a kind of disease, its own kind of oppression, through which the infected “pierce themselves with many pains.” The recommended antidote is to focus on our Lord Jesus Christ and his one commandment, that we may “take hold of the life that really is life.”

Suggestions for the Liturgy

Call to Worship

One: Praise the LORD!

All: Praise the LORD, O my soul!

One: I will praise the LORD as long as I live!

All: I will sing praises to my God all my life long!

One: Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals — in them there is no help.

All: When their breath departs, they return to the earth: on that very day their plans perish.

One: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God.

All: God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.

One: God keeps faith forever.

All: God executes justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

One: The LORD sets the prisoner free and opens the eyes of the blind.

All: The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down.

One: The LORD loves the righteous.

All: The LORD watches over the strangers.

One: The LORD upholds the orphan and the widow.

All: But the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.

One: The LORD will reign forever — your God, O Zion, for all generations!

All: Praise the LORD!

Confession

Holy One, although we are created in your image, too often we do not resemble the image of you in Psalm 146: the One who gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry, who watches over the strangers and upholds the orphans and widows. Forgive us, we pray. Renew your Spirit within us, that not only our words but our deeds might praise you. Amen.

Absolution/Assurance

The good news of our faith is that no matter who you are or what you've done or where you're coming from, if you turn to God, God is ready and willing to lift you up, embrace you in grace, and offer you new life.

Sending Forth (inspired by 1 Timothy 6:6-19)

One: We brought nothing with us when we came into this world.

All: And when we leave we will take nothing with us.

One: There is great contentment in simple living.

All: "'Tis a gift to be simple — 'tis a gift to be free."

One: But those who lust to be rich fall into many self-destructive behaviors.

All: They become prisoners of their obsession with status and luxury.

One: For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.

All: "Let us live simply, so that others may simply live."

One: But we are called to live an alternative lifestyle, based on Christ's one commandment: "Love one another."

All: Take hold of the green lifestyle of eternal life, which is the way of love and the way of creation.

Hymns

Through All the World, a Hungry Christ (DE TAR)

My Hope on God is Founded (MICHAEL)

Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence (PICARDY)

We Shall Not Give Up the Fight (ONLY STARTED)

Be Not Dismayed (MARTIN)

O for a World (AZMON)

Stories that Preach

Most of us refuse to imagine the lives of our neighbors "outside our gate" in the developing countries. Yet it is their extreme poverty that makes it possible for us to feast sumptuously every day on our American lifestyle in the globalized economy. In Columbia (now the chief supplier of roses to our country) women get 10¢ an hour on flower plantations owned by the Dole Corporation on land once used to grow wheat for bread. One-third of those roses are sold in the U.S. on Valentine's Day alone, using jet fuel to get them here fresh "just for her." In Ghana and Ivory Coast, the chocolate we wolf down is produced on plantations that practice child slavery. The diamonds we wear to pretty ourselves are bought wholesale from terrorist groups in Africa who use that money to buy landmines — "blood diamonds." The Wall Street profits from this unregulated "free trade" for *each* of the flower, chocolate and diamond corporations is billions of dollars each year.

One begins to see what is behind

the new dogma in our churches that thou shalt not talk about sacrifice: we have been co-opted by our consumerist culture. How dare we be asked to give up candy bars for 40 days in Lent — that is so oppressive! How dare we be asked to sacrifice some leisure time to write Congress demanding a law requiring that labels on chocolate, flowers and diamonds tell us where they are from! And yet those Indian women on the rose plantations in Columbia undoubtedly sacrifice each Sunday, giving offerings to help neighbors who are even less fortunate than they.

In 2000, I was blessed to take a millennium trip to Israel and Egypt. While there I visited two of the missions we support. I spent a day with our UCC missionary in Bethlehem, who lives and works with Palestinians who have been living in a virtual concentration camp since 1967. She teaches the children to read in their own language and advocates for them in the Israeli political process.

I also spent a day in Cairo with our Coptic mission partners (Copts are an

oppressed 10 percent of the population in Egypt) who use our gifts in their gradual process of educating the dominant culture to stop circumcising girls, which, because of the extreme poverty there, is usually done with the detached tops of tin cans. I visited a Coptic couple who work as neighborhood organizers in the slums of Cairo. He works with other men to cover the open sewers while she works to teach other women about child nutrition. As I sat with them on a rug in their dirt-floored shack, I will never forget the honor and sacrifice of them giving me a cup of hot tea because I was their "neighbor" from America.

For billions of people who sit "outside the gate" of our lives, the hunger and sores of Lazarus are a way of life. They walk for hours every day to get water ... often from a polluted source. They spend more hours gathering bits of wood for cooking fires that fill their huts and lungs with carcinogens. In places like Darfur, hundreds of thousands have fled from their homes and villages, losing what little they had to escape violent militias' intent on ethnic cleansing.

Children's Message

The Man Who Never Noticed
Luke 16:19-31

You know, when Jesus was on earth he told many stories, and one day he told a story about a rich man and a poor man.

First, Jesus told about the rich man. Jesus said the rich man had the best of everything. He enjoyed life. Jesus said the rich man wore purple and fine linen. Clothes of purple in Jesus day meant that the person who wore them was rich, rich, rich! Jesus didn't say the man ate three meals a day. Jesus said that he feasted sumptuously. If he had had turkey, he probably would have ripped the leg right out and gnawed on it. Of course, they didn't have turkey, but he probably ate lamb and beef every day. They didn't have napkins back then, so he would take a piece of bread and wipe his fingers and his mouth, and then he would just toss it on the floor.

Then Jesus told about the other man, the poor man. His name was Lazarus. Jesus said he had some type of sickness that caused sores to be all over his body. He was a beggar. He was

always hungry. Sometimes he would be lucky and get a piece of that bread that the rich man had wiped his mouth with and tossed on the floor. But, sometimes the dogs beat him to it. The poor man would lie outside the gate of the rich man's house. Sometimes the dogs that he had wrestled with for the bread would come up and lick his sores.

The rich man would go out of his gate, but he never did anything for the poor man. What did he think when he saw the poor man lying there? He might have thought, "I give money at my synagogue (which was his church) and they help the poor, so let them help this man." He might have thought, "If I give to every poor person I see, I won't have anything left for me and my family." Or, he might just not have noticed the poor man at all.

Jesus said that the poor man died and the angels carried him to heaven. There he met Abraham. Do any of you know who Abraham was? (*Give time for the children to respond, and if none know, then tell them.*)

Then Jesus said that the rich man died. He noticed that the poor man was not around and he noticed he didn't have any servants any more. Where do you think he was? (*Give time for the*

children to respond.) He was in agony. He looked up and saw Lazarus, the poor man, with Abraham. The rich man was not in a place of agony because he was rich. Do you know who Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was? (*Give time for responses and make sure they know.*) Dr. King once pointed out that Abraham was rich. It was not because the rich man was rich that he was in torment. It was because he never noticed the poor man and never did anything to help him.

Prayer: (*Have the children pray after you*) God, open our eyes that we may see what you want us to see. Help us not to be blind to the poor, like the rich man was. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Rev. Bob E. Murdock, Sr. is a retired minister who, with his wife, taught English at Shandong University of Technology in Jinan, China, after retirement. He was awarded "Outstanding Teacher of the Year" for teaching English as a second language. He is the author of a book of children's sermons, Come on Down (see www.sermonsforchildren.com). The profits from the book are donated to a seminary in Jinan and community development work in Nicaragua.

The Sermon

The Revelry of the Loungers Shall Pass Away

The prophet Amos lived during good times in ancient Israel. In the eighth century before Jesus, the stock market was booming. Those who were already rich received huge tax cuts from the king. They built McMansions, probably using the labor of illegal immigrants whom they paid next to nothing, but nobody was asking any questions. If you were part of the ruling class, you were too busy shouting "Let the good times roll!" to ask any questions about justice.

During the eighth century, the institutional religion of Israel went right along with all that national arrogance and social injustice. Israel had had a strong history of the separation of temple and state, which had empowered prophets like Nathan to confront King David when he killed Uriah. But by the eighth century, there was no more separation of church and state in Israel. Religion and government were in bed together. There was an official religion with a national theology that promoted the values of the affluent. When it came to preaching, whatever King Jeroboam

wanted, King Jeroboam got.

To sum it all up, the official theology of Israel at the time was this: "God wants you to be rich."

Enter Amos. He shows up on the scene right in the middle of the eighth century, during the last ten years of King Jeroboam's reign. We wish we knew more about him. And yet the last thing that Amos wanted was to be a celebrity. He was a humble man, unlike the official clergy who opposed him, who were into religious pomp and hobnobbing with the rich and famous. In contrast, Amos came from a small town in Judah called Tekoa, near Bethlehem. One of the few things he said about himself was that he was a working class man, "a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees." But as he lived his simple, dignified life herding sheep and doing some landscape work in his small town, he looked around at the worship of wealth, the social injustice, and the bastardizing of the faith, and he felt God calling him to prophesy.

Just a note on that word "prophesy." In our secular culture today – and I think we got this notion from the fundamentalists back in the old days – to "prophesy" means to predict the future, like a fortune-teller with a crystal ball. In the secular mind, among people

who don't know our biblical tradition, the idea of a prophet brings up images of street corner preachers who may well belong in psychiatric wards. Back in the 1950s, the American ideal was rapidly changing from Norman Rockwell scenes to fast food, tract housing and big cars. Anyone who did not conform to the official theology of "God wants us to conform, be rich, and rule the world" that was being preached from church pulpits and civic podiums alike was derided as a beatnik, a prophet, or a doomsayer. It was common in the 1950s for the dominant culture to picture prophets as haystacks of hair wearing sunglasses and carrying signs that read "The End is Near!" Looking back, you can see why it was so important for the corporate culture and its media to mock anyone who questioned the "progress" of aerosol cans, cigarette smoking, and our conversion to an oil-based way of life, from gas guzzling cars with fins to the beauty of Formica. Anyone who questioned such things was clearly a silly doomsayer in need of psychiatric help to conform.

But the image of the prophet changed in the 1960s, when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reclaimed and reincarnated the biblical definition

of a prophet. In the Bible, a prophet is not so much a fortune-teller as someone who speaks the truth to power — not so much someone who sees the future, as someone who sees the present truthfully. Not that there is not an element of seeing the future in prophecy. But it's a matter of where you put the emphasis. Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is prophetic in the biblical sense because it tells the truth about the present — it speaks truth to power by naming who is responsible — and then warns of the future consequences of what he sees in the present.

That's the kind of prophet Amos was. He was not silly or ridiculous. He was a decent, dignified, down-to-earth man — a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees — who felt spiritually compelled to leave his life-as-usual and speak out against the social injustice and bad theology in society at the time. He knew that if the economic sin of opulence for a few and poverty for the many continued — let alone the religious justification for that economic sin — the future consequences of that cancer at the root of his society would lead to devastation and ruin.

And he was right. Which is why, I'm sure, his words were remembered and archived in what today we call the Bible. After the good times were over and Israel was in exile, the same people who had refused to listen in the past now all said, "My God, Amos was a prophet! How on earth could he predict the future?" And yet, at the time of his ministry, the mainstream culture hated him when he preached:

Alas for those who are at ease
in Zion!

Those who lie on beds of ivory,
who lounge on their couches
and eat lambs from the flock
and calves from the stall —
who sing idle songs to the sound
of the harp.

They drink wine from bowls
and anoint themselves with the
finest oils,
but they do not grieve over the ruin
(of the poor)!

Therefore, they shall be the first to
go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall
pass away.

Imagine being so arrogant that you think a wooden bed is not good enough for you, so rich you can throw money

away on imported ivory beds all the way from Africa. Imagine being so rich that you don't wait until your sheep and cattle have reproduced to make your herds sustainable — you just go ahead and eat the lambs and calves as a "delicacy." Imagine being so self-indulgent that you do not drink your wine from a cup but from a bowl, and anoint yourself with the finest oils while other people go hungry.

And why should they question their ethics? On the Sabbath they went to mega-temples where the official state priests taught prosperity thinking. "God wants you to be rich!" they proclaimed. Those mega-congregations believed that if they attended worship and supported the temples with their offerings, God would reward them financially and keep Israel number one, the first of the nations. What a convenient religion for the rich! They hated Amos when he preached from the margins that God was saying to them:

I hate, I despise your worship
celebrations,
and I take no delight in your religious
assemblies!

I do not accept your tithes and
offerings.

Take away from me the noise of
your praise songs!

I will not listen to the music of your
worship bands!

The only offering that is acceptable
to me is

justice rolling down like waterfalls,
and right relationships like ever-
flowing streams!

Eight hundred years later, Jesus had to make a choice. Would he follow the priestly tradition or the prophetic tradition within Judaism? His parable about Lazarus and the rich man proves that he chose the tradition of the prophets.

"There was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day." While on the street outside of his gated community, "there lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table." You get the picture.

One thing that strikes me in this story is the gulf between rich and poor, between Lazarus and the rich man whom tradition calls Dives. The distance in this life between Dives at his table and

Lazarus at his gate continues eternally, even though their roles are reversed. In Eternity, Dives looks up from Hades and sees Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham "far away." And in that moment of torment, what does Dives do? Does he repent and say he's sorry for the way he treated Lazarus? No, he asks that Lazarus be his servant and fetch him some water to cool his tongue! Abraham replies that Lazarus cannot come to Dives because "between you and us a great chasm has been fixed" which no one can cross.

Of course, today we are too sophisticated to believe in heaven and hell. Well ... maybe we believe in heaven — heaven seems nice, so we'll keep that. But we definitely don't believe in hell because hell is not nice. And how convenient for us rich North Americans that there is no hell, no place where we will be held accountable for eternity. Anyway, in our white middle-class theology, the only thing that is really evil is sex. But the relationship between rich and poor? Economic relations don't have anything to do with God and salvation, heaven and hell, do they?

Jesus thinks so. He does not say one word about the sexual behavior of Lazarus or Dives. He focuses entirely on the economic injustice between them. And there's another disturbing thing in this story Jesus told. It is not about accepting Jesus as our personal savior. It's all about justice and right relations. It even says that listening to "Moses and the prophets" is enough to get you into heaven. Jesus agrees with Amos that what God wants is not piety and petty moralism but justice rolling down like waterfalls and right relationships springing up like ever-flowing streams.

Jesus told this parable to disturb us. He is asking us if we are the brothers and sisters of Dives who refuse to listen to the prophets. Are we so callous that even someone rising from the dead is not enough to convince us to act fairly? Perhaps if we listen to the Risen One, we will see the self-interest in turning away from the love of money and turning toward the love of Christ and his one commandment — "love one another" — that we might "take hold of the life that really is life."

Rev. Dan Geslin is the pastor of Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ in Denver and a doctor of ministry student in preaching and worship at Iliff School of Theology.