

September 25, 2022

Amos 6:1a,4-7

I Timothy 6:6-19 Luke 16:19-31

Amos 6:1a,4-7

¹Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, ...

⁴Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; ⁵who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; ⁶who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! ⁷Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

After focusing only on the Gospel lessons this summer reading Amos reminded me of some people's negative image of God; and image of God, which appears to be angry, vengeful even. It can feel almost cruel after hearing about the love of God which Jesus preached.

I was able long ago to reconcile what some saw as dissidence between the loving God of Jesus and a reading of Hebrew Scriptures that sees God as demanding and sometimes vengeful. Many people reject religion, because they either reject an angry God or they see the use of God's anger as a way to control people.

Reading Amos this week compels me to share my thinking on this. This passage in Amos, and most passages in the Bible that speak about God's wrath are not about a vengeful God, rather they are stories telling us what happens when we do not follow God's laws, or rather, God's instructions.

In Amos, written over 700 years before Jesus's birth, God is telling those who live "high on the hog" that the consequences of their lack of concern for the least among them will be their down fall. God wasn't responsible for the ultimate fall of Israel and later Judah. Amos is not telling the people that God wants to punish them. In God's name he is warning them of the consequences of their actions or, in this case, their inaction.

God's laws, God's instructions on how to live life are given in order that humanity might have life and enjoy life to its fullest. Fear of God does not mean we are to be frightened of God, rather we are to be in

awe of God; to be thunder-struck at the magnitude of God's creation and God's unconditional love for all of creation. Lack of awe, lack of respect for God, for love, for creation leads to our own downfall.

Jesus gives us an example of this in today's Gospel lesson from Luke.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house – ²⁸for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

After almost 800 years, Jesus is warning his followers about the same problem Amos spoke to. It has been 2,000 years since Jesus told this story. Apparently, we and our Christian forbearers have not been paying attention, either to Amos or Jesus, because this is a very modern story. Humanity is still not ready to listen to Moses, the prophets, or Jesus, much less to put their words into action. Look at the growing gap between the wealthy few and the impoverished

many. Hunger and starvation are at our gates, here in the United States, and continue to grow.

Luke tells us this story – among other reasons – to remind us that even sending someone raised from the dead will not change the minds and hearts of people. We have had 2,000 years of Jesus’s teachings and we are still not getting it. It breaks my heart, as I am sure it breaks yours. But, you did not come to church to hear all this bad news; news we hear every day. And I don’t want church to be a “downer”; it is supposed to lift you up.

Even in his distress the Apostle Paul saw the power of the remnant, the few who listened and sought to put Jesus’s teachings into practice. This is what he wrote to Timothy:

I Timothy 6:6-12,17-29

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, child of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

Paul is telling Timothy not to give up hope. He is to live the faith he has taken on; live “life that really is life.” He can begin to do this by striving for “godliness combined with contentment.”

There was a time people took pride in their work, in what they accomplished. They were content. Now it seems we have developed an insatiable desire for possessions, money, fame, and more. The problem seems so insurmountable. Capitalism seems impossible to defeat. Yet, in our head-shaking at the state of the world, there is good news, encouraging news to be found all around us – in people, in the natural world. Just look at how quickly nature can revive itself from disaster and destruction.

- Lake Erie came back fast
- Mount St. Helen, after eruption and total destruction, came back fast

If we believe in the resurrected one, if we believe in the promises of God, and if our belief is trusting in God, a trust founded on an awe so strong and deep it feels almost like fear, then we too can help our world draw back from the brink of destruction.

We are the rich ones – sure there are those with more cash and more things – but in relation to where many in the world are at, we are extremely wealthy. To avoid destruction, our focus must change – from a love of money to a love of God; a love lived out, in Paul’s words, when we “do good, are rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.” This is how we can, as Paul tells Timothy, “take hold of the life that really is life.”

So, I say to all those who think Hebrew Scriptures are all about a vengeful, violent God take a second look at the descriptions of God in the Bible, keep in mind that God’s commandments, God’s instructions are for our own good, not God’s sadistic enjoyment.

Look at what we already have – “if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.” And then, after we have calmed our need for “more”, let us allow a little awe-inspired fear to come over us that we might be content to put our faith, our trust in God and not money; content to put our trust in the One “who provides us with everything for our enjoyment.”

As our awe-inspired fear of God grows in this manner, our fear of everything else will diminish, God will be able to work in and through us, and we will be content.

May God give us the faith we need so to live. Amen.