

Let Justice Roll

Whenever we hear about the country of Israel, regardless of context, I bet that most of us think of the modern country. We think of one united country and project that back onto the ancient nation of Israel. This is fairly accurate if we are thinking about the nation under Kings David and Solomon (with the exception of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, of course). Otherwise, we are actually quite inaccurate in our thinking. Prior to King David Israel was a confederation of twelve tribes. David united the tribes into one kingdom and created a capital in Jerusalem. The writers of the Bible might have acted like it was one nation before that, but it was not true in the political sense until David.

After his son Solomon's death the kingdom split in two. The Northern Kingdom claimed the name Israel, while the Southern Kingdom was called Judah after the predominant tribe of that region. This can get very confusing for the reader, because Israel can mean the United Kingdom, the Northern Kingdom or the people as a whole regardless of where they lived. It can also be used as an alternate name for the patriarch Jacob, who after wrestling with an angel is renamed Israel. Additionally, biblical poets often used Jacob as the name of the Israelite people. From the time of the split the peoples of the two kingdoms were rivals akin to the Hatfields and McCoys. While both groups were Jews they considered the other to be apostate. It was a family feud at its worst.¹

When the shepherd and horticulturalist Amos is commissioned by God as a prophet and sent to prophesy against the people of Israel we may wonder what is up. Amos is from Judah and God calls him to go to the Northern Kingdom/Israel to prophesy. Amos' prophecy is rendered in a very clever manner. He tells the people of the Northern Kingdom how awful each of the surrounding nations is. He delivers horrifying prophecies against them. He even prophesies against his home country of Judah. As he inveighs against one country after another, seven in all, I can feel the leaders of Israel (not the common folk which the prophecy will make clear) getting puffed up. They might be saying to themselves, "See how this prophet from Judah is telling us the faults of all of our enemies. Not once is he saying a word against us. Clearly we are the Lord's favorite."

But his prophetic speech eventually turns to Israel. Instead of praise for them, his invective is all the more harsh. This is a people who:

"sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;...

¹ Just to complicate things further, the people of the Northern Kingdom would eventually come to be called Samaritans.

they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.”²

If they were puffed up they are now dramatically deflated and what’s more they are angry.

Amaziah is a professional prophet to the King of the Northern Kingdom. This means he works for the king and he is to give good prophecies, ones that make the king happy. Amos is a prophet anointed by God not a pro. That is what he means when he says "I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son.”³ That is he does not work as a prophet and he did not learn to be a prophet. He is calling Amaziah out as a fake.

The two of them get into a verbal duel that reminds me of gunslingers in a Western film. Amaziah’s words boil down to “This town ain’t big enough for the two of us. You best skedaddle or there will be the devil to pay.” Amos responds with a verbal quick draw listing the woes that will befall Amaziah, the king and the country. It is not a pretty sight. Amaziah is no match for Amos. He knows Amos is God’s anointed prophet and he has to be worried about his prophecy.

Amos is my favorite prophet because of his call for justice for everyone especially the poor, widowed and orphaned. He was also the favorite prophet of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. King quotes Amos with lines that I hope are etched on your heart, “... we will not be satisfied until [justice roll[s] down like waters, and righteousness [like] a mighty stream.”⁴

Those words ring out across more than two and three-quarters millennia. Anyone who says that the Bible is no longer relevant is not paying attention. Those words of God through Amos are as potent today as they were in 750 BC or 1963 AD. When a society chooses the rich over the poor, the powerful over the powerless, and greed over righteousness it is corrupt. It can no longer claim to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It can no longer claim to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. It can no longer claim to be doing anything but worshipping at the graven image of mammon. Such a society makes the dollar into the golden calf of Baal.

We celebrate billionaires rocketing into space, while there are people, our own neighbors, who struggle to have enough to eat, pay for medicines, and basic needs. Secretaries and blue collar workers pay more in taxes than entire billion-dollar corporations. We as a nation have become so bedazzled by wealth

² Amos 2:6b-8 NRSV

³ Amos 7:15

⁴ From “I Have a Dream” by The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. Amos 5:24 KJV

and celebrity, even the wealth and celebrity of some preachers, that we have forgotten the Good News of Christ as well as the prophecies of Amos. The culture says that greed is good and compassion and righteousness are for fools.

We need to search our hearts about our priorities. We need to be like Amos prophesying against greed, covetousness, and the lust for riches. It might not be easy because we may not feel rich. Yet compared to many people who hope for one meal a day and do not have any of the luxuries we consider necessities we are stupendously wealthy.

We do not have to give up everything and become mendicants to fulfill God's call. But, if we think we are Christians we do have to look out for others. We have to listen to the words that God spoke through Amos. We are too close to becoming like the Northern Kingdom, caring only for our luxuries while trampling the poor in the dust.

"Seek the Lord and live."⁵ "Seek good and not evil, that you may live and so that the Lord God will be with you."⁶ "Hate evil and love good, and establish justice..."⁷ These are the words of God. These are the words spoken against God's chosen people nearly three thousand years ago. The prophecy came true and for their transgressions they were conquered and dispersed.

We must be careful stewards of our gifts and not squander them on trifles while others struggle to survive. We must remember that those without are no less precious in the sight of God than we are. We must strive as Amos did, and Jesus did, and Dr. King did to "let justice roll down like waters" on all people that righteousness will be the mighty stream from which every woman, man and child may drink and be nourished and refreshed. For that is what the Lord God of hosts calls for from you and me this day and every single day of our lives.

⁵ Amos 5:6 NRSV

⁶ Amos 5:14 NRSV

⁷ Amos 5:15 NRSV