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# *THE REFRAIN OF GOD*

*AMOS 4:6-13*

**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL  
ON EASTER SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2021,  
BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY**

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Every Sunday is a refrain. We go through each day of the week like a verse in a hymn but then Sunday comes and we embody a refrain of the Christian life or more specifically, the Christian calendar. Sundays. It's a churchgoing day, the Lord's day—this is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it—and it comes around every week, a refrain that reminds us of God, regardless of our worship styles and denominational traditions; Sundays remind us that we are to give God our attention at least one day in the week! Sundays are holy refrains that emphasize who and what should be most important in our lives—the life and work of God in Jesus Christ. Sundays have been called 'little Easters,' so each Sunday is a little resurrection refrain—he is risen—reminding us that walking with God is about life, eternal life, abundant life, real life.

Probably most obviously, we know that hymns have refrains. Even our opening hymn has a line that functions as a refrain—"and crown him Lord of all." Refrains grab our attention because they occur more than once. From the very beginning in Genesis at creation, God functioned with refrains—"there was evening and there was morning." The sun sets and the sun rises, again and again. Refrains are built into God's creation. They're built into the Bible. For instance, the psalmist in Psalm 136 repeats, "for his steadfast love endures forever." In our lives, in creation, in the Bible—everywhere, if we're paying attention, there are refrains.

The prophetic literature of Amos is no different. "Thus says the Lord" is a refrain in this book. "Hear this word" is a refrain in this book. But there is another refrain that I want to draw your attention to this morning; it comes from the mouth of God and it is this phrase—"yet you did not return to me."

As mentioned last week when we kicked off this summer series on the minor prophets, in Amos, God is a roaring lion. God is ticked with the people of Israel. Upset about their oppression of the poor and crushing the needy. This is not a God we'd bring home to meet our parents or invite to a neighborhood potluck. This God uses language we may never use like calling others "cows of Bashan" and talking about taking people away with "fishhooks." Sometimes I think we may be too relaxed and casual around God, acting as if God is our best friend sitting on our living room couch, sipping some cool lemonade while we watch Netflix together.

We may create an image of God that we like and that suits us like when a little girl was busy with her crayons doing a drawing. Her mother asked what she was drawing. The little girl said she was drawing a picture of God. Her mother said, "But dear, nobody knows what God looks like." The little girl answered, "They will when I get my drawing finished."

We'll look at the image of God the prophet Amos paints.

God's refrain should grab our attention and give us some insight into the nature of God—"yet you did not return to me." Five times, we hear it. "I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return to me...I also withheld the rain from you when there were still three months to the harvest...yet you did not return to me...I laid waste your gardens and vineyards...yet you did not return to me...I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt...yet you did not return to me...I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah...yet you did not return to me."

God is talking to the chosen people of Israel who he brought up out of the land of Egypt and with whom there is a covenantal relationship. "You only have I known," God tells them. You only have I loved. You and I had a thing together. But sometimes it's the people closest to us who can hurt us the most. It even happens to God who is personal and relational.

“Yet you did not return to me.” I hear God’s disappointment. I hear God’s lament.

It reminds me of what happens to God in another prophetic book, Isaiah chapter 5. There, God is the beloved who has a vineyard on a very fertile hill in Asheville, NC. God dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; [God] built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; [God] expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.” And then God asks a B.B. King blues question, “When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?”

“I’ve done all of this, and this is what I get? I did all of this for you and you still don’t return to me; you still don’t return my love.” It’s like a soap opera right here in scripture.

It’s a refrain in a minor key—“yet you did not return to me.” God’s litany of punishment doesn’t even do the job, showing us that punishment doesn’t necessarily lead to real change. Retributive justice does not necessarily change hearts. And God will not “coerce covenant loyalty”(Carolyn Sharp). God will not force us to love him.

Regardless of what is done or what is said, no matter how many refrains there are, how many times you repeat yourself, some people will never return home. Some people will never return your love. All lost sons or lost daughters will not be like the so-called prodigal son and return home to his father. You can try your best but your child, your friend, your cousin or your colleague, may never return. Some will be far off forever playing in a pig’s pen.

This is what God experiences. Even at the end of Amos where there’s the promise of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom and rebuilding, all who were there at the beginning will not be present at the end. There may be a remnant and a new start for the people of Israel but not all would have returned. Not all will renew their relationship with God.

“Yet you did not return to me.” This refrain has reverberated down the acoustical corridors of history to our time and still rings true today. Throughout the Bible, a ‘return’ means at least two things: a turn to God through acts of confession and repentance (Isa 19:22, Hos 14:2, Joel 2:12) and a return to obedience to God (Deut 4:30, 30:2).

I don’t know what your image of God is but in C.S. Lewis’ classic children’s book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, he tells of the adventures of four children in the magical kingdom of Narnia. It’s an allegory of Christ and salvation, with Christ represented by the lion Aslan. When in Narnia, the children meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who describe the mighty lion to them.

“Is he a man?” asked Lucy.

“Aslan a man!” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is King of the wood and the son of the great emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don’t you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion – *the* Lion, the great lion.”

“ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no mistake” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Return to *me*, the lion king roars in Amos—confess, repent, obey. Return to me. Not to a denomination or a liturgical style or a theological belief or a spiritual practice or a physical building, but me. In Amos, God is personal and later says, “seek me and live” (5:4), which is the whole point. God desires the people of Israel then, and desires us, now, to live through seeking him, because God is the pathway to life and as in Narnia, God is good, but you won’t know that unless you return.

These days on campus, we are speaking a lot about return to worship and return to work protocols. But the prophet Amos calls us to return to God. This is the real return we should be discussing and facilitating and imagining. Returning to your spiritual home and the source of life.

If you don’t remember who this God is, listen to the hymn line Amos sings—“For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind, reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the Lord, the God of hosts, is his name!” He’s the King. This is the cosmic creator God who also desires to be in a personal relationship with you as well. Transcendent yet immanent. Sits high but stoops low to us even through the waters of baptism. Divine yet human in Christ, personal, close, knowing the number of hairs on your head. Return to *me*.

Despite the disappointment, despite the roar of righteous anger and lament—“yet you did not return to me”—this refrain signals something else about God. It shows us that God is relentless in trying to bring us back by any means necessary because of God’s covenantal love for us. His roar is really raging love for us. A lion king who loves. He may not be safe but God is surely good. Not safe because when you meet him you’ll lose your protected life yet he’s good in that you’ll gain the free, extraordinary, abundant life you always dreamed of. And God wants us with him. This five-fold refrain--“yet you did not return to me”--is another way of saying, “I want you to return to me. I want you with me forever.”

Are we really that worth it? God tends to think so, which is why we hear the longing in this refrain. Return to me. Return to me. Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

God longs for you. The lion roars for you. Will you come? Will you return? What will your refrain be?