MORE THAN A SONG

AMOS 5:18-24
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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I am so relieved that the prophet Amos was not one of my parents. Can you imagine his bedtime stories snuggled up against you in your bed? "Honey let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was the day of the Lord and "it [was] darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake." Good night baby, love you." Can you imagine? There's a grace in not having a prophet as your parent or professor.

But even in this strident, scary, judgement oracle, we can learn something about God. We learn that we can't always figure out God and there's often an element of surprise in the life of faith. The Matthew gospel reading for today reveals this too. When speaking about the coming of the bridegroom we hear, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." I wish we could figure out God. 'Come on God, you know we don't like surprises!'

In Amos, the day of the Lord is darkness, not light, gloom, not brightness. To us, that may seem a bit surprising because we often put so much emphasis on light, and God did say, 'Let there be light.' But to ancient Israel this imagery for the 'day of the Lord,' which in Amos is the earliest datable reference to this phrase, is not a surprise but the expected sign of God rising up against their enemies in a holy war. This day of the Lord itself, however, does consist of surprises "as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake." Surprise! God acts in unexpected ways, or a future experience will be a surprise and not a very pleasant one.

But to be honest, the real surprise is that ancient Israel is the one who's on the receiving end of it. The 'woe-cry' (what the NRSV translation has as 'alas') at the beginning is actually a wail of grief over the dead but not for the enemies of ancient Israel but for Israel itself. The metaphors of the bear and the snake reveal a person who escapes to their death. No one sings the jubilant 'This is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.' It's more like a dirge in a minor key—(O happy birthday…) This is the day of the Lord, woe is me! The real surprise and the irony are that the people of God end up being the enemies of God. They are the ones fleeing into danger and ultimately right into their own funeral procession.

To take it a step even further, the real "shock of this word" (James Mays) is what the Lord says about their worship. "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps."

The key elements of their worship—the festivals, the sacrifices, and the melodic praise—disgust God. Why? According to the commentary on this passage by Old Testament scholar James Mays, "Righteousness in the courts and markets [are more important than] liturgies and offerings in the shrines." Talk about a surprise! Perhaps a surprise for us all.

Amos reminds me of the question God raises through the prophet Isaiah, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" (Isaiah 1:11). It reminds me of what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said in a sermon, "It is possible to affirm the existence of God with your lips and deny his existence with your life." The shocking revelation is the danger of piety. Our piety, our spiritual practice, our liturgical rites may be our unbeknown preparation for our demise. One's own rituals created for God can become damaging to your life if they get in the way of your endeavor to embody the fullness of faith or life in God in the world. What Amos reveals is that you can

think you're the best friend of God but in fact be God's enemy. Rituals can become ruinous when they don't draw us closer to God but away from God's redemptive purposes for the whole world.

The irony is that you're trying to get close to God, but the very practices established to do so are creating a distance from God's will and way in the world. All of this is to say that rites [r.i.t.e.s.] don't make you righteous! Singing 'Jubilate Deo' doesn't make you just! Lifting your hands in worship doesn't make you holy. What can happen sometimes, unfortunately, is that we worship worship, thinking we are worshiping God but instead we make the act of worship an idol and this idol wounds us so much so that we become worthless for God in the world! This is why you can be addicted to prayer but still ignore the needs of your family; this is why you can be consumed with songs of praise while consuming your neighbor. God is saying, "I know you have a beautiful liturgy but is your life beautiful? I know you like the melody of the harp but what about the melody of your life?" God is so full of surprises.

An added surprise is that this revelation happens when God comes in the dark. At midnight is when the bridegroom comes, and the day of the Lord *is* darkness. So we shouldn't be afraid of the dark because in the darkness is where the truth can come to light. It's in the darkness where we see the light. A deep-sea diver writes of his experience of diving in this way: "Enroute to the floor of the ocean the diver first passes through the 'belt of the fishes.' This is a wide band of light reflected from the surface of the sea. From this area he moves to a depth of water that cannot be penetrated by light above the surface. It is dark, foreboding, and eerie. The diver's immediate reaction is apt to be one of fear and sometimes a sudden spasm of panic that soon passes. As he drops deeper and deeper into the abyss, slowly his eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness; what was fear is relaxed and he moves into the lower region with confidence and peculiar vision."

Darkness can be luminous. In the Psalms, we hear David say to God: "even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you" (Ps 139:11-12). So don't be afraid of the dark. God is in the dark so there's a glow in the dark. Darkness is not only where death and funerals are but where new life is. In Genesis, creation happens when "darkness covered the face of the deep." And "while it was still dark" the resurrection of Jesus happens in the Gospel of John. Writer James Baldwin remind us, "The darkest hour is just before the dawn…" Barbara Brown Taylor encourages us to learn how to walk in the dark. And what Amos shows us is that we can learn how to witness in the dark too. There's a mighty revelation in the darkness this morning.

God's critique of the people is rooted in their faulty theology and practice that saw worship as solely vertical without any horizontal dimensions touching the social sphere. God teaches a theology of worship that is wedded to two key terms in Amos—justice and righteousness. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." 'You can have *your* liturgy, but I want your life in the world!' Liturgy, as Eastern Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann taught, is for the life of the world. In Amos, the worship and rites of the community are unacceptable to God because they don't *live* as the community of God in the world. Righteousness and justice are both related to the social order. "Justice in Amos has to do with the court in the gates and means the judicial process and its decisions by which right order is maintained in social relations, especially the protection of the weak and poor through the help of the court." Justice protects the social order by correcting wrong, thereby repairing the integrity of the social fabric. "Righteousness is the rightness that belongs to those who fulfill the responsibilities [of their] relationships" (Mays) It's a relational concept—doing right by the person.

Justice and righteousness are so intertwined that this righteousness bears fruit in the justice of the courts. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." 'I don't need another song for worship. I need worship that is justice because worship is more than a song. I don't need more lip service. I need your life service. It's not the song you sing, but the life you live that matters to me.' Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff made this point clear in an essay many years ago when he titled it "justice as the condition for authentic liturgy."

In other words, let your life speak! Let worship be social witness, even if it happens in the dark. As I tell my students, the hardest sermon you'll ever preach is the one you preach with your life! God is calling us to worship with justice and righteousness in the marketplace of life.

'It's not another prayer, another sacrifice, another festival, another procession, another hymn or even another alb or stole, Luke.' I hear you, God. 'I don't need more religious accoutrements. But more righteousness and justice.' I hear you, God.

'I need your life, your body, your voice, your action in the world—justice and righteousness like an everflowing stream in the homeless shelters and food pantries and court rooms and prisons and addiction recovery centers.' I hear you, God. 'I need you out there, not in here. I need my Word on the street—flowing with the justice of Jesus everywhere.