

**Amos 2:6-16** <sup>6</sup> This is what the LORD says: "The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and I will not forget it. I will not let them go unpunished any longer! They have perverted justice by selling honest people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals. <sup>7</sup> They trample helpless people in the dust and deny justice to those who are oppressed. Both father and son sleep with the same woman, corrupting my holy name. <sup>8</sup> At their religious festivals, they lounge around in clothing stolen from their debtors. In the house of their god, they present offerings of wine purchased with stolen money. <sup>9</sup> "Yet think of all I did for my people! I destroyed the Amorites before my people arrived in the land. The Amorites were as tall as cedar trees and strong as oaks, but I destroyed their fruit and dug out their roots. <sup>10</sup> It was I who rescued you from Egypt and led you through the desert for forty years so you could possess the land of the Amorites. <sup>11</sup> I chose some of your sons to be prophets and others to be Nazirites. Can you deny this, my people of Israel?" asks the LORD. <sup>12</sup> "But you caused the Nazirites to sin by making them drink your wine, and you said to my prophets, 'Shut up!' <sup>13</sup> "So I will make you groan as a wagon groans when it is loaded down with grain. <sup>14</sup> Your fastest runners will not get away. The strongest among you will become weak. Even the mightiest warriors will be unable to save themselves. <sup>15</sup> The archers will fail to stand their ground. The swiftest soldiers won't be fast enough to escape. Even warriors on horses won't be able to outrun the danger. <sup>16</sup> On that day, the most courageous of your fighting men will drop their weapons and run for their lives. I, the LORD, have spoken!"

### "Zeroing In"

I need to start this morning by giving you a little history lesson that gave rise to the days of Amos and why God sent him to go to Israel and say, "I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain. The swift will not escape, the strong will not muster their strength, and the warrior will not save his life. The archer will not stand his ground, the fleet-footed soldier will not get away, and the horseman will not save his life. Even the bravest warriors will flee naked on that day," declares the LORD." I hope that by the end of this lesson, you will have put two and two together and come to the conclusion that 2,760 odd years after the days of Amos, after years of what we call progress, that the way we human beings are and what we do to each other hasn't changed much.

We will start with King David. The Bible describes him as a man after God's own heart. He's the king to which all the other kings of Israel were compared. David united the twelve tribes of the sons of Jacob into the kingdom of Israel and reigned from around 1007 to 967 BC. As you remember Jacob, or Israel as he was renamed was the grandson of Abraham whom God called and told to go to a land God would show him and after he got there God would make a great nation of him and his descendents. That promise came to fruition with David and after years of warring to make it so God gave him peace on all sides for about 20 years. Before David died he turned his throne over to his son, the legendary Solomon, who in his 40 year reign built the Jerusalem temple and many other cities, and in his great wisdom made Israel to be a very wealthy kingdom. But...we won't talk about how he enslaved the Israelite people to do it. For him to have such great wealth somebody had to be enslaved. That's Economics 101. Moreover, Solomon had 700 wives, most of whom were of foreign birth and worshipped foreign gods. Out of respect for them, Solomon built shrines for them in Jerusalem so

they could worship their gods and he worshipped with them. Though the LORD was Solomon's God, he did not have the single-minded heart of his father David. He enslaved his own people for his own gain and he practised idolatry. Two things the LORD had expressly forbade the people to do ...and history applauds Solomon for his wisdom?

When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam took the throne and in an effort to appear powerful to his people, he decided to make the enslavement even harsher for the Israelites. In turn, the Israelites who were from the north refused him as king and took a man named Jeroboam to be their king. With Rehoboam and Jeroboam the kingdom of Israel was divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom still called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah. The first act of Jeroboam, the king of the Israel in the north, was to build two golden calves, not dissimilar to the calf that the Israelites made during their 40 year sojourn in the Wilderness. He then echoed Aaron's proclamation: "Behold, Israel, your gods who brought you out of Egypt." Over the next two hundred years the two kingdoms fought their neighbours and each other. Gone was God's covenanted peace on all sides that persisted despite the Solomon's idolatry and enslavement of God's own people.

So we come to the mid-700's BC and meet up with the prophet Amos, a tree pruner and shepherd from the kingdom of Judah, sent to Israel to speak the Word of the Lord. Apparently, God had to call someone from Judah because there was no one left in Israel who prayed enough to be prophet. Israel was very prosperous in those days. Under the reign of Jeroboam II, Israel had reached the peak of its material power and prosperity, had expanded its borders, and was a major imperial power in the region. Abraham Heschel, the most noted Jewish scholar on the prophets, writes about those days,

"there was pride (6:13-14), plenty, and splendour in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces. The rich had their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory (3:15), gorgeous couches and damask pillows (3:12), on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts. They planted pleasant vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils (6:4-6; 5:11); their women, compared by Amos to fat cows of Bashan, were addicted to wine (4:1). At the same time there was no justice in the land (3:10), the poor were afflicted, exploited, even sold into slavery (2:6-8; 5:11), and the judges were corrupt (5:12)."

Amos came to tell these idolatrous and complacent rich people that the LORD who brought them out of slavery in Egypt and gave them a land and who made them to be a great nation was heart-broken and angry to the point of disgust with them and was now going to send an enemy upon them who would utterly crush them. All that would remain would be a small remnant who would have nothing more than a piece of a broken bed and a tattered pillow. Indeed, 40 years later the Assyrians annihilated the northern kingdom and dispersed the ten tribes that were there among the nations never to return.

Through Amos, the LORD brought the Israelites this message in a very prudent way, by pointing the finger at the sins of the enemies of Israel, while zeroing in finally on Israel. First, the LORD will get Damascus in Syria for its repeated predation upon the

Israelites living in Gilead. Then God will hammer Gaza of the Philistines and Tyre of the Phoenicians in Lebanon for raiding small towns in Judah and Israel for the sole purpose of capturing people to sell to Edom as slaves. Next, the LORD will go south to crush Edom, the nation of Jacob's brother Esau, for its predation upon Judah. After that the LORD will go to the east border of Israel/Judah to annihilate the Ammonites and Moabites. Ammon, or Ben-Ammi, and Moab were cousins to Israel, the two sons that Abraham's nephew Lot had by his own daughters. The Ammonites were going to be punished for invading Gilead (eastern Israel) and being so heinous that they ripped open pregnant women; the Moabites would get it for desecrating the royal tomb of cousin Edom's king. They are all related over there. Then Judah, the sister country with that temple, the Jerusalem temple, so holier than thou towards Israel and her paganism, the LORD will nearly destroy Judah as well because they had forgotten the Law and had also turned to idolatry. Then...the finger points to Israel and it is brutal. Their idolatry has led them to wickedly abuse the poor in the land. Solomon's enslavement of the people was nothing compared to what the Israelites had done to their own.

In the LORD's eyes idolatry is bad enough, but when it creates a small wealthy and wicked class at the expense of an impoverished mass who have no rights in their own land, that's when the LORD says "enough". That is Old Testament Prophets 101. If we get so caught up in our idolatry that we are wrecking the lives of others and growing fat from their labours and dehumanizing them in the process and not caring about it, judgment's a-coming. Amos proclaimed God's judgment on things like territorial expansion, national enthusiasm, material influence and affluence, complacency, self-satisfaction, conspicuous consumption, comfortable and self-serving religiosity. Sound like anybody you know?

In true form with the text I could do to us what Amos did back then. I could point out the national sins of Canada by first pointing out the sins of our neighbours particularly with the banking demise that happened down south this past week. Or, I could leave nations behind and start talking about the evils of the multi-national corporations like Exxon, Wal-Mart, and Dole Fruit which we all probably have shares in. But, I'm not going to take the route that Amos took and start pointing out the sins against humanity with which we are all complicit. I don't have time for that...And frankly, we don't have the stomach for it. There are too many and you were supposed to be able to put two and two together. We are complicit to soooooo much subtly overt greed/self based evil. The only way out of it is a radical break with our culture. Enough said.

Where I would like to finish up here is to talk about the prophet because we are the prophets for today. A prophet is someone who has stood in the presence of the LORD long enough to begin to feel God's own heart-brokenness with humanity, *with us*, for no one is exempt from the fallenness of humanity that took all of creation with it. We read the prophets and sing, "What an angry God we serve" or "What a jealous God we serve" because the LORD sounds so angry and jealous through the mouths of the prophets. But, anger is a secondary emotion that follows on the coattails of being hurt and broken-hearted. The prophets knew the hurt that the LORD felt and with that passion, they faithfully delivered the word of the LORD which "came upon them".

You see, prophets don't sit on hillsides overlooking the world so that they can deduce what the problem is and then deduce what a moral and loving God has to say about it and then muster up the courage to go say it. Rather, it is in prayer where they feel what God feels, where they come to know the heart and mind and will of the Lord, and there, the word of the LORD comes upon them.

The stance of the prophet is not to pontificate from a stump about the world's problems for which they have deduced what a moral God would do about it. And unfortunately so much of the preaching that happens on Sunday morning is just that, a deduction of God-principles from Scripture. Instead of standing in front of the people thumpin' the Bible, the prophet kneels before the LORD with his back to the world and intercedes for it. You see, if there is no prayer, no intimate conversation with God, then there is no prophecy.

How does this apply to us? Well, the leadership of a church cannot pretend to lead it in mission and ministry into the world without first being in the presence of God, listening and praying and praying and praying for its people and the world around them. We cannot each pretend to know what God wants us to do with our lives (or the lives of others) until we have knelt, as the prophet, in the presence of the Lord and listened and prayed, listened and prayed, listened and prayed about it. To quote Micah, the LORD says to us “Seek justice, love kindness, walk humbly with the LORD your God.” If we aren't walking humbly with the LORD, which means to pray, then our only recourse is to rely on our own instincts where we inherently have no idea what it is to love kindness and the result is that we won't know what justice is or where to find it.

I talk about the prophet because we are the New Testament people of God and we are his prophets to our world. You see, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy God has poured his Spirit upon the gathering of his people. We, us, right now stand in the presence of the LORD, and in worship, we hear Scripture read and taught and the Gospel proclaimed, and in prayer we should begin to know God and to feel God's love and broken heartedness for his creation. Since the LORD has made it so that we are the ones who kneel in his presence as the prophets of old did, it follows that we are those – little old you and little old me – those through whom God will address the nations, the corporations, the citizens, the employees of the world, and indeed each other with his desire for love, justice and equity throughout creation. We are those who bear the message that there are consequences for complicit participation in destroying God's creation and the people in it. But praise the LORD; we are those who also bear the Good News that there is a way out of our enslavement to Mammon. It is Jesus Christ and the community born of his Spirit. Do not take lightly the love that we share for one another for it is God's answer and promise to the brokenness of this world. We, my friends, are the prophet of the LORD. Amen.