

Amos: Justice Rolls Down (12Nov17)  
Amos 1:1-2, 5:14-15, 21-24

Can I suggest this image of justice and flowing waters must apply to the economic policies of President Reagan, even though it may first ring in your ears associated with Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement?

Such observations occur for these six weeks of the Narrative Lectionary, that the words of prophets, the word of the Lord continues to speak, to have varied voice. That's true, though we isolate some of these passages as applying only to one instance—whether the Civil Rights era for today or amid Handel's *Messiah* and Christmas Eve services with next week's reading from Isaiah. We take the impression that the words have a solitary application.

But that misses several layers of their importance. First, we must remain aware that the prophets weren't just offering future forecasts, making predictions about a Messiah, as if their message had to wait for hundreds of years to make any sense at all, and now we only look back to verify that their prognostications about Jesus were correct.

The prophets were speaking a message from God, of God's will and purpose, of God's command and God's blessing, primarily to the people of their own time, even if the significance became more timeless. Just as it wouldn't make sense for me to give a sermon that wasn't for you but was a time capsule communication for 500 years from now, the words of the prophets were meant and had meaning for their own time and place and people.

So Amos was speaking to his culture's prosperity, but also injustice. His nation was expanding and profiting, but the benefits weren't equally shared. People were taking bribes and spurning the courts, selling shoddy merchandise at rip-off prices. They built fancy

houses with good landscaping. They lounged on beds of ivory, got dolled up in finery, and went all out enjoying feasts to gulp down bowls of wine with entertainment, but weren't in the least grieved over distress around them. Amos observed these "fat cows" (as he called them) had too much ease, too much luxury, while others went hungry and poor.

And Amos declared God was against that.

That may seem second-nature to us, but Amos is an entirely new voice within biblical history. It hadn't addressed God's concern about economic injustice. Amos speaking of God's displeasure and opposition for having too much at the neighbor's expense, and that detrimentally affecting relationships with God—that was a new insistence.

Although Amos was addressing inequality in his own time, these words aren't isolated to that period. We apply them in other ways, as well. So a central aspect and second layer of importance is in how we understand Jesus as the embodiment of God's presence partly because he embodies the words of the prophets. From the emphasis of Amos, we recognize Jesus as living out God's justice, striving for a religion that connects to the wellbeing of the poor, not simply paying lip service to relationships with God and with society. Jesus portrays that living rightly for the marginalized is inherent and vital in relating to God. In our Gospel window today, Jesus says he himself is the living, flowing water to quench the thirst of those who long for justice. Amos had no way of knowing about Jesus, but if he had lived three quarters of a millennium later, Amos would've seen Jesus personifying his message.

So the words of Amos were first spoken to his own time. But they are not left as ancient and dead words from 2700 years ago. We also find their fulfillment in Jesus. And the third layer of importance is in other situations and

settings where these words keep resonating, as a living message, empowered by the Spirit of God.

So Martin Luther King could take this message, could tweak the wording, and could speak the voice of a long gone biblical sheep owner and dresser of sycamore trees, then to confront racism. This "mighty stream" Martin Luther King proclaimed became one of his favorite images, including in his "I Have a Dream" speech, where in part he said:

We can never be satisfied as long as *African Americans are the victims* of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We cannot be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity. We cannot be satisfied as long as *some* cannot vote and *others believe they have* nothing for which to vote. No, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

There it is, Amos again talking through the most famous speech of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, not with the old historical moment of ignorant luxury, but a new moment of voting rights and segregation and white supremacy, yet maintaining Amos's impatience and dissatisfaction at how domineering injustices linger.

Moving to our time, and because Amos was part of shaping this awareness of and resistance to injustice, I want to share a few sentences of a modern instance about elites, echoing the old injustice, in a new book by Naomi Klein. She writes:

What matters is that not one of them appears to be worried about climate change. The early catastrophic events are playing out mostly in poor parts of the world, where the people are not white. And when disasters do strike... there are growing numbers of ways for the wealthy to buy their relative safety... They will lose some beachfront property, sure, but nothing that can't be replaced with a new

mansion in the mountains... Almost every one of them is catastrophically unconcerned... In an age of ever-widening income inequality, a significant cohort of our elites are walling themselves off not just physically but also psychologically, mentally detaching themselves from the collective fate of the rest of humanity.\*

That condemnation strikes me as a fairly exact parallel of Amos's critique of those who lie on beds of ivory and neglect the poor at the edge of town. And that's not only a rebuke from Naomi Klein and Amos, but from God. God is against this elitism that would wall ourselves off from the problems others are having at our expense. That is evil, says the Lord.

Now, all of that might make us question effect. Was God's message received in Amos's time? Was it effective in changing the attitudes or behavior of the rich people in oblivious leisure? We don't know. Martin Luther King's message still needs to be repeated for our white ears. Naomi Klein may not be speaking directly to the situation of us in this room as climate denying elites, but it's a message that resonates in our lives anyway and at the very least needs to be spoken.

Finally, however, I'm also aware that in a few minutes we will be offering our pledges of how we use our time and our skills and our financial resources. Almost certainly, Amos's message of economic justice is relevant and should affect our consideration for those decisions and dedications.

That realization that this matters for what we do brings me back around to President Reagan. For weeks now, I've been thinking about Amos's vision of justice as ever-flowing waters, and Martin Luther King's take on it as a mighty stream, which seems to contrast starkly with the term "trickle-down economics." President Reagan claimed the top having more

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\* *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump's Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need*, p180

would drip down to everyone else. While things have gotten significantly better for those few, by some measures it has actually worsened for many and by all measures income equality is more disparate. The pool for the rich is growing, while the trickle to other 90% of us is drying up.\*\*

Now, obviously that has much broader policy implications. It goes with the conversations about reforming the tax code. And the voice of Amos—indeed, the voice of God—should be part of that discussion, and it may be for us to offer that prophetic voice.

Instead of the slow trickle of justice, God calls us to open the floodgates, to un-dam the river, to gush with goodness. And though the implications can be much broader, still as we gather for worship, we have the chance to practice. We can practice speaking and hearing the truth. We practice envisioning new realities. We live into the justice God calls us to. And our pledges and offerings are a vital part of that. It is the practice of not holding back the floodgates, not keeping dammed up what we either consider our own or have failed to notice we retain at the expense of others who need more. Our worship is an opening for the outpouring of justice.

I confess I don't suggest this devotional practice lightly, knowing that the largest chunk of what you give here goes to fund me. So I will say, thank you. And with that realization, know that I am swimming eagerly in these waters with you, responding to the invitation to let it flow abundantly and give freely, again increasing by an additional 6% what flows from my hands—or, better, through my hands—for God's work. Thank you for hearing this prophetic message anew and letting it work on you today, because

that is how God comes to quench your thirst also.

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\*\* <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2015/jan/13/elizabeth-warren/warren-average-family-bottom-90-percent-made-more->