

## Sermon for July 24, 2016 – “Bad News, Worse News”

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Amos 5:21-24, 8:1-12

“I hate to tell you this, but...” Have you ever had to begin a sentence with these words? I know from experience, it’s no fun being the bearer of bad news. And when the recipient of the bad news doesn’t have a clue as to what’s coming, the task is all the more difficult. It’s no wonder doctors often hide behind a wall of medical jargon when they have to deliver bad news. Maybe you’ve heard the one about the physician who called a patient and said, “I have some bad news and some worse news.” “Oh no, Doc,” the man said, “What is it?” “Well,” the doctor said, “Your test results showed that you have only twenty-four hours to live.” “Gee, Doc,” the man replies, “What could be worse than that?” “Well,” the doctor replies, “I forgot to call you yesterday!”

If there’s anything worse than bearing bad news, it’s having to do so to a person or people in the midst of enjoying **good** news. Even if it’s a word of warning, something that they very much need to hear. Very often, folks just don’t want to hear it. It seems that no matter what you say, or even how you say it, all they hear is you trying to upset the apple cart, or spoil their fun. This gives you just a **hint** of what Amos went through when God called him to leave the tranquility of his shepherd’s field to take a message of doom to a nation living in the midst of good times. The economy was good, the nation was at peace and all signs pointed to more of the same.

Nowadays, Amos would be roundly criticized as a “negative thinker”, a prophet of “doom and gloom.” And there’s something very negative, very disturbing, in his message to the northern kingdom of Israel in our reading this morning! Indeed, if we take it (Amos’ message) as God’s word to the Israelites, as we should, we are likely to find ourselves quite uncomfortable with what is said. In the midst of all Israel’s glad handing and high living God says to Amos, “Go tell my people I’ve had it! Time’s up!” Amos is sent with a message to the people of God that translates: “I have bad news and worse news! “The bad news is – God’s had it with your hypocrisy and is going to punish you. “The worse news is – there’s nothing you can do about it!” This isn’t a message any of us would want to hear. However, it’s a message we modern Christians would do well to pay attention to so that God won’t have to send an Amos to us!

What would happen, I wonder, if Amos were to make an appearance here and now...? What if he walked in, marched straight up to the pulpit and told us that God was absolutely displeased with us? How would we react? Would we laugh it off? Would we simply dismiss him as just some wacko? Would we, at all, take him seriously? Would we ask: “What can we do about it?” How would we react if we did and were told “nothing!”

For Israel, this is exactly what happened. It was too late for them. But maybe, I think, not for us. It’s imperative to listen to prophets. Those who by definition are called to bear God’s message. It’s imperative to hear the **voice** of God while the **grace** of God still invites us to hope and new life.

But there’s a question it would be good to know the answer to, and it’s this, what is it that brought God to the end of his patience with the people of Israel? I’ll get to that. But to fully appreciate all this, we have to understand that God, much like a human parent, goes through a process. We see it unfold in scripture. He first reaches out with **love**. When that fails, he then reaches out with **discipline**. And then when **that** fails, he reaches out with **consequence**. The consequence for Israel, and I’m speaking of the northern kingdom here, was devastating. In a word: annihilation! Complete and utter annihilation! The end of their very existence as a nation!

The southern kingdom of Judah would meet a similar fate soon enough when they refused to listen to the prophets they'd been sent.

So what can **we** do? Is there **anything** we can do? Short answer – maybe. And this brings us back to what brought God to the end of his patience. Two things: The first has to do with living out one's faith, making sure that what you say lines up with what you do! I mean, we all claim to have faith. We all "talk the talk" – but do we actually "walk the walk?" Is our faith just something we do Sunday or do we live it all week? Is what you want (and ask for) from God, the same as what you give to others on behalf of God? Is the mercy and grace you hope for (and probably expect) from God the mercy and grace you extend to others? In other words, is the forgiveness you ask of God the forgiveness you grant to those who "sin against you?"

Even as they sat in worship the people Amos spoke to were thinking about how they could make more and bigger profits. These people, descendants of the slaves that fled Egypt, are now selling the poor and dispossessed into slavery! The ancient rule of Israel was to leave the leftovers of the harvest for the poor but now they were packaged for sale. Lying, cheating and corruption is par for the course. Meanwhile, the people doing all this are worshipping regularly. They're singing hymns, reciting prayers and making offerings. They were quite pleased with themselves and smug in a belief that they were good people. People whom God had blessed, who'd one day inherit God's kingdom. But, by all accounts, they certainly did not **live out** their faith. The question for us is...do we?

The second lesson is about the nature of divine justice. With God, you see, justice delayed is **not** justice denied. For ancient Israel Amos' message comes as a bolt from the blue! **"I despise your worship ...I take no delight in your solemn assemblies."** **"Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them..."** It doesn't stop there. **"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."** **"Your joyous hymns have become wailing! You will suffer utter destruction!"** Whoa! That's pretty harsh!

How did such a thing happen? What would it be like to hear God say to us, "I hate your worship!" I have to tell you honestly folks, I'm not at all sure I could've answered God's call the way Amos did. If I had to speak his words to you today I'm not sure I could've gotten out of bed this morning much less get into this pulpit. I don't know, maybe it's human nature to becoming self-centered living when life is good and we're free from troubles. Like that song you hear in those commercials enticing you to visit Jamaica: "Let's get together and feel alright." Amos wasn't the first to confront a spiritually dull Israel, nor was he the last. Much of the Old Testament is an up and down/off and on litany of people who forget God, then cry out to God, then forget God, then cry out – and so on.

Now, under King Jeroboam II there'd been decades of prosperity. As the "haves" grew spiritually unresponsive and ethically corrupt, the "have nots" on the other hand grew poorer, were driven further into debt, and forced into slavery. I imagine that to many of the dispossessed, it must've seemed as if God was looking the other way. That there was no hope of justice. Amos says otherwise: **"The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds."** As I said earlier – with God, justice delayed is **not** justice denied. The judgment of God may take time because it's tempered by patience and a longing for the return of his wayward children. But when justice comes, and it will, it's swift...and, as Amos puts it, **"rolls down like a mighty river,"** and with it, **"righteousness like a never-failing stream!"**

It's a big mistake to mistake God's patience for permissiveness! So what's the take-away here? Well, it's actually, three-fold...

- First, that complacency is one of the deadliest enemies of spirituality. Let me repeat that: complacency is one of the deadliest enemies of spirituality. As the people grew wealthier they became more self-centered. As they became self-centered, they became complacent...Certainly in their relationship with God. They began congratulating themselves for what they'd accomplished. They took God more and more for granted. In doing so and in making their faith more ritual than a relationship with God they became candidates for judgment. That's the first take-away.
- The second, is that compassion is one of the clear signs of a lively spirituality. Let me repeat that: compassion is one of the clear signs of a lively spirituality. It seems that what disturbed God most was that the people had ceased to be a caring community. One of the chief characteristics of the ancient Israelites was that they'd been able to treat each other with the care and compassion. They'd been able to be the face of God to one another. But all that had changed. A people freed from slavery were now buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. Far from caring for their neighbor. They were now taking advantage of them. What about the Church (capital C) today? What about **us**? A few weeks ago, I shared a quote that says "Sympathy sees and says, 'I'm sorry.' Compassion sees and says, 'I'll help.'" Brothers and sister, whether it's ancient Israel or the contemporary church, compassion in the community of faith is a sign of God's presence and the absence of compassion is a sign of God's absence. My question is: How are we doing?
- With that we come to the third and final take-away here...And it's crucial. The best way to get at it is through the words of the prophet Isaiah. He said: "**Seek the Lord while he may be found – call upon him while he is near...**" In other words, there may come a time when God cannot be found even when we diligently seek him. There may be a time when we want to hear from God, but God will not speak. When he no longer has anything to say. It's the famine Amos speaks about at the end of our text. Trouble has come, devastation is at hand and people are hungry to hear from God. "But," Amos says, "God has nothing to say." The truth is that God doesn't operate on our schedules. No – rather, we must conform to **His**. That whole "Thy will be done" business. When God speaks we're not given an infinite window of opportunity to respond. And the message of both Isaiah and Amos, indeed, all the prophets; is that we fool ourselves when we delay in responding to God. We fail to realize that it's an insult to turn God away when he knocks at our door. He won't knock forever. One day it will be too late.

The prophets message may come as a gentle reminder - Or as a stern warning. Only we can be the judge of that. But, we reject it at our peril. Every week we come here and hear God's Word. But does it affect us? Does it move us? Does it motivate us? Does it change us? Does it convict us? In other words, does it reveal just how short we often fall? Does it show us how far off target we are? If it doesn't, it should. Why? Because it's meant to!

It may not be what we want to hear – words of judgment and condemnation rarely are. What we want from God are words of comfort, words of hope, so we often dismiss anything not to our liking. We assume the harsher words are meant for others.

The people of Israel certainly did. While there might've been no hope for the nation of Israel, there's certainly hope for us. Sure, this was a specific word to a specific people at a specific time, but that doesn't mean that we can simply sit back and say that there's nothing for us to learn from Amos. Or, for that matter, **any** of the prophets. If you disagree, look around – look at what's happening in our world, in our community and in our church. They've all seen better days.

Brothers and sisters, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but I've got some bad news and some worse news... The bad news is that we probably aren't going to be able to turn back the clock, nor are we likely going to be able to restore things to the way they were in decades past. We cannot go backward. The worse news is that we're probably going to need to make some changes and that includes changes to our ways of thinking. It means taking a hard look at who we are and what we do – both individually and as a church, to see where change is needed and then make the necessary changes. I believe we can do this. At the same time, we don't have all the time in the world. Now, time ran out for the ancient Israelites - But there's still time for us. Our very survival depends on how we respond to God's word...On whether we heed it or not.

Are we even listening?

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.