



I Like God's But ... I Cannot Lie

Amos 5:18-24

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For much of this week, I've been quite unsure what sermon was right, necessary, and best to speak God's word for this morning. Each week, I try my hardest to have a sermon written before I get home Thursday night, that I may enjoy a two-day weekend with my family. Not only did I find myself writing the sermon on Friday this week, but I found myself re-writing the sermon last night. Nothing I wrote seemed right.

Part of my struggle this week is in reflecting on the events of last Sunday in Sutherland Springs, Texas, where 26 people, many children, lost their lives while sitting in worship like we are right now. To say I was shaken would be an understatement. I've thought quite a bit over the past week about the incident. Admittedly, I've wondered, what if that had been our church. What if those kids had been our kids ... my kids? What if that had been us?

Has the church really become the place that people turn to take out their brokenness in fits of rage? Isn't the church supposed to be the place where broken people come to find healing and peace? Are we not supposed to be the extension of God's grace in the world, a place where hatred, anger, and brokenness are healed? Are we not supposed *to be* living examples of how broken people can find hope and peace in the joyful love of God?

I found myself last night wanting to tear up all the work I had done over the course of the week in preparation for this morning, because frankly, I don't know that anything I wanted to say seemed grace-filled enough to speak a word of hope in the midst of such hurt. I even had a witty sermon title that took into account Amos' use of Lions and Bears, and was gonna go full *Wizard of Oz* on you with a "Lions, Tigers, and Bears. O My!" sermon. But, honestly humor – while being part of what keeps me going each week – doesn't seem fitting when the body of Christ is mourning the loss of sanctity – when the sanctuary becomes a slaughter house. I found that my blank thoughts during the week led to a sermon that was too long, too unfocused, and lacking any real meaning.

When I have no clue what words to say myself, I often turn to see what my colleagues are saying on social media in the hopes that something they're saying can inspire in me a word of hope to offer – even to claim for myself. Instead of words of hope this week, I found again, as I have in recent months after every mass shooting, fits of rage about how our nation has done nothing to prohibit such violent acts from continuing. I found devout people, who I look to in my darkest of moments, crying foul on those who have nothing to offer but thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers, they say, aren't needed – or at least, aren't sufficient.

In seminary, my preaching professor, Dr. William Bobby McClain – who literally marched with Dr. King in the Civil Rights Movement – used to tell us that as church leaders, there were three things we'd better be prepared for in life. He said, "At any given moment, you'd better be ready to preach, pray, or die." This week, I found myself unsure of preaching; I found myself convinced by colleagues that prayer isn't enough; which means my options going forward seem bleak.

Finding little hope from social media (which, by the way, I don't suggest you rely on social media for hope ... lesson learned), I went back to the scriptural text for this morning. If the world has little inspiration to offer, surely God's word could spark in me the hope I need to pen a sermon that would be worth hearing and would get us all through the week to come. It just so happened to be that today's text, coming from the Revised Common Lectionary, was pre-selected as Amos 5:18-24.

At times, I'm less than amused by God's Word and the Lectionary's timing.

Just so we're on the same page as to who Amos is, Amos is one of the twelve minor prophets, who served at a time when the people of God were divided into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Amos served as a prophet to Israel in the north while Jeroboam II was King of Israel, in the mid-8th Century BC. At this time, the people of Israel were at no real threat to invasion by outside nations. It had been almost 200 years since Israel and Judah had split, and it would be another 40 years until the Assyrians came in to conquer the Northern Kingdom, at the end of the next prophet's term (Hosea).

I turned to Amos 5, and I found that the first thing Amos does is to ask this blunt question, "Why do you want the day of the Lord?"

I could have screamed at the Bible – this was infuriating. What do you mean, why do I want the Day of the Lord? ... Have you not seen what's been going on lately? Have you not seen the number of unnecessary deaths in our nation due to bigotry, racism, and preventable killings due to high capacity weaponry? Have you seen the gross perversion among political and spiritual leaders of the Biblical text for personal gain? Have you seen the unnecessary provoking of nuclear war among world leaders? Come on, Amos - have you seen what I have seen? ... You've got political leaders comparing Mary and Joseph to sexual predators, and you can't understand why I long for the day the Lord will return?

Angered enough at Amos as I was, Amos doesn't leave his provoking to an opening statement. He goes on to criticize our understanding of the return of the Lord. Amos says, "The Day of the Lord is darkness, not light. It's 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."

What happened to the joyous return of Christ that would lead to children never crying? That would leave the wolf lying down with the lamb? What happened to the new thing God promised, in which the land we toil and the fruits of our labor not being taken unjustly from us?

... What happened to the triumphant entrance of the Lord that would bring peace and mercy to all of God's children? Amos doesn't elaborate, he just says the return of the Lord is darkness, not light. And then he keeps speaking.

Knowing what I think I know about the Biblical text, in the midst of pain and hardship, I'm confident God is faithful to the covenant made with the children of the Lord, so I naively kept reading, still hoping and expecting for this text to offer a good word from which I could preach this morning. I needed Amos to redeem himself, to give me a pertinent and faithful message of God's blessing.

But alas, Amos isn't done critiquing yet.

Speaking now in the first-person voice of God, Amos says, "I hate and despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." As if, in modern day language, the voice of God speaks, saying, "I hate the way you celebrate the holidays of our faith and the way you worship me."

Amos continues, "Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon."

And he concludes, "Also, take away the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps."

Festivals, worship, burnt offerings, grain offerings, offerings of peace, noise of the song, sound of the harp – God is rejecting everything that constitutes worship. Everything that makes up the practice of the people of faith in the temple is rejected by the prophet. "Amos announces that God both detests and discounts the central worshiping practices of the chosen people. Their elaborate and faithfully performed liturgies, long hallowed by priests and people, are now abhorrent to God."ⁱ

Again, talk about being in a fit of rage – I came to the text looking for a word that would offer me the hope and comfort I needed to make sense of senseless acts of violence going on in the world so that I could find a word of hope and comfort to speak in this space. And instead of finding comfort, instead of finding my rage justified, instead of having my anger validated, what we find is one of God's chosen prophets telling the church that the problem isn't out there, it's right here. The Lord speaks, saying, "I hate the way you worship me – with your burnt offerings and the offering of your fatted animals. Take away the noise of your songs. I have no desire to hear your Steinway piano or Schantz organ."

I've encountered moments in my life when I have used the often spoken phrase in the church realm to refer to a situation, "That'll preach." ... this text does not offer for me one of those moments. By far, our church – as with almost any church you'll find – spends the majority of our time, our planning efforts, our financial resources, and our physical space centered around worship. If God is so fed up with our worshipping practices, why are we working so hard to

create a place to encounter God? If God hates the music and the instruments – should we just remove them? If God despises our offerings – should we just not take an offering?

Amos offers one last verse in this passage, which begins with the word “But ...”

In a week that was marked by a lack of clarity, a hurting heart, and sense of dejected hope, this was the best word I had read all week. “But ...”

Anytime you find the word *but* used as a conjunction in the Biblical text, you *must* keep reading. Such a use means the author is not done speaking yet, and that you can not assume you know all you need to know about what they author is saying. In a week where I wasn't sure how much more pain I could handle, the word “*but*” offered a promising invitation to keep going.

So I read on, and Amos speaks, saying, “But, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” ... “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

In this prophetic phrase, the lack of understanding of why Amos defined the Day of the Lord in such bleak descriptors and the reason for God's displeasure with our worship became more clear. It seems God is not dissatisfied *because* we are worshipping or even the practices of worship. “God condemns an understanding that worship, even sincere worship, is somehow sufficient for a proper relationship with God. The problem [God was addressing through Amos] is that [the daily lives of God's people] had not been showing forth justice and righteousness.”ⁱⁱ

It seems to me that God wasn't disappointed in the people's *desire* to worship the Lord. The disappointment of God lay in their lack of commitment to live out the very justice and righteousness for which they worshipped God. It's like Amos is saying, “If there is no social justice, there is no acceptable worship to God. God will not tolerate comfortable worship and social and political isolation. God will not tolerate a full church and a vacuum of justice.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The word of inspiration in this 24th verse certainly gave me a more peaceful rest last night, because in this message there is much hope promised in the midst of a hurting world ... justice and righteousness will spring forth. Though, when understood as the conclusion to this passage in Amos 5, I'm not sure that the message of this final verse is much more comforting for us as a church (either as Washington Street UMC, as the United Methodist Church, or as God's church universal).

If the Day of the Lord means the full realization of justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like and ever-flowing stream, but we would encounter the Day of the Lord as darkness instead of light, then we must understand Amos to be critiquing *our* lack of participation in God's justice and righteousness today. As if, on that holy Day, we will say to the Lord, “We are here to join in your eternal glory,” and we will hear this message in response, “Why have now come to join in glory, when you neglected to do justice and righteousness in your lives? Did I not teach you the way? Truly my justice and righteousness have been present

with you all along.” The word of Amos is challenging, for while it affirms the justice and righteousness of the Lord, it questions my commitment – our commitment – to live these in the here and now. Such a challenge is hard because we never want to be told we’re not doing enough. With all that we’ve encountered this past week and year, and with this passage as our text today, I can tell you, for me, this was a hard week to prepare for worship.

But in God’s grace, as I stand here now, here is what I know: in this text, we have the invitation before us to not be a church whose worship and lives are bankrupt of justice. God’s invitation is to make justice a reality for all of God’s created. If we are true to our mission – if we live out our belief that God is love, and that we are making a place for everyone to know that love – then we must commit to the hard work that lay ahead, and proclaim, as the body of Christ, as the community of the faithful, as the hands and feet of the Lord, we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. May God empower us that these words do not so easily fade into the rafters, but that they claim our souls until with the splendor of Christ, justice and righteousness are revealed in full glory.

ⁱ John C. Holbert. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 4*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Terence E. Fretheim. workingpreacher.org. Retrieved November 9, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fretheim