

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost

November 8, 2020

Psalm 70:1–5 (ESV):

1 Make haste, O God, to deliver me!

O LORD, make haste to help me!

2 Let them be put to shame and confusion
who seek my life!

Let them be turned back and brought to dishonor
who delight in my hurt!

3 Let them turn back because of their shame
who say, “Aha, Aha!”

4 May all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you!
May those who love your salvation
say evermore, “God is great!”

5 But I am poor and needy;
hasten to me, O God!
You are my help and my deliverer;
O LORD, do not delay!

First Reading: Amos 5:18–24 (ESV):

Let Justice Roll Down

18 Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!

Why would you have the day of the LORD?

It is darkness, and not light,

19 as if a man fled from a lion,
and a bear met him,

or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,
and a serpent bit him.

20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?

21 "I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

24 But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

EPISTLE: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 (ESV):

The Coming of the Lord

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

THE GOSPEL - Matthew 25:1–13 (ESV):

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

25 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. 8 And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us

some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ **9** But the wise answered, saying, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ **10** And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. **11** Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ **12** But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ **13** Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Sermon 43 – Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost

“Rolling Your Own Justice”

Amos 5:18-24

Dear friends,?

As the church year winds down with the actual year, the readings turn to matters of endings, before the new beginning that Advent represents. Our Old Testament lesson from Amos has some strange things to say about endings, and as a whole it really isn't all that encouraging. There's reasons for that as I'm sure you can guess, but a great deal of this will be exploring the end verse and talking about justice, a nice topic for today's day and age of arguing loudly about things. The questions to ask here are why does God talk this way about something that is supposed to be a blessing, what is being emphasized, and finally, what is justice by God's rather bizarre standards?

Amos is a common man, a village man. You all would find him familiar, he doesn't have much time for big cities or the snake-pit that is Israelite politics. Best we can tell he is either a shepherd or farmer of sycamore figs, which is a thing that exists in that time apparently. This is a man of the land, doing his business until God intervenes in His life in the form of an earthquake. God does earthquakes from time to time, along with fires, and Amos takes this as a sign, and he is given this

word to speak to the people. Amos is not a book about a happy God. His message largely conveys God's anger, God's outrage, at Israel's sins. Those sins are worth noting. This is a good time to be an Israelite, and that isn't common in the Old Testament. It isn't the golden age but the borders are big, their neighbors can't threaten them, the economy is booming. This is the Israelite Roaring Twenties. Nobody was doing the Charleston, and no flappers were to be seen, but this is the good times to spend money, get a bigger house, get a second house, make that second house a bigger house, and so on. You get the idea, I won't go through all of it.

Prosperity is a gift from God. All good things come from him, even if it seems a product of human ingenuity. God does this, and in His promises to His people, God seems to indicate that He does this out of His love and His generosity and wants His people to enjoy it. So what's the problem here? Like many things human, this particular cycle of booming business did not extend to everyone. It has a seedy underbelly. Throughout the whole book, Amos lambasts the people of Israel not for their wealth, but for what they do with it and how they acquire it. More on that later. First, the initial part.

“18 Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light, 19 as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. 20 Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” Amos is a useful reminder that when talking about the “day of the Lord” you are talking about a decidedly two-edged sword. The day of the Lord is often referred to in the Old Testament as a time when God would

move, would act, in a decisive way, often to save His people, but just as often to condemn them. This is potentially confusing to us, because to we Christians, when we talk about the day of the Lord, we're talking about Jesus' return. How could that be anything other than a good thing, right? Well, it is, but that's not what Amos is talking about. He is talking about the day the Lord will visit Israel, and in Amos, this visit will not be a good thing. This will be a time of judgment in the worst sense, a time of reckoning. The day of the Lord is a blessed thing for God's people, but the opposite for those who reject Him. At this moment, that includes pretty much all of Israel.

But what is the nature of that rejection? That's what Amos talks about next. You're used to me talking about Israel worshipping foreign gods, false gods. That's not what this is. This is something much more human and much more familiar. **“21 I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”** Israel is worshipping God, the true God. They're following the laws of Leviticus and Exodus. Everything that God talks about hating here is stuff that God Himself told the people to do. They were supposed to have feasts, grain offerings, assemblies, offer fattened animals, and sing songs. So why does He hate it? That last verse gives you the clue. But let justice roll down, righteousness.

It is so easy to think we are above all that. I dare to say that not a single one of you has ever ventured into a place where false gods are worshipped. You guys don't put up idols, build statues and pretend they're gods. The thought is laughable, its silly, what Christian would do that? But what do we do instead? We do what Israel does here. We do the worship, we do the church, but we cling to our sins. We cling to our selfishness, our looking out for number 1. That's what Israel does. Amos talks about this constantly, about how the Israelites were just piling in the money, building fancy houses, buying expensive clothes, having big feasts. Where did they get the money for that? They got it by lack of charity, exploitation of the neighbor and the alien. They got their money by ignoring the poor, corrupting their justice system. They were doing everything right in church, and everything wrong in their society.

We are good people. We help where we can, we look out for each other. We try to get involved where and when it makes sense to us. Verses like these remind us not to get too comfortable with those labels. To always be willing to ask yourselves, what am I not doing? How have I failed? What more can be done? For many of you, there isn't much of a satisfactory answer to that, and that's fine. Wealth spoils, and we are fabulously wealthy as a country. Beyond the wealth, though, is what we do with it. How we use it, how we let it effect us.

God reminds us to let justice and righteousness pour out of us. In our actions to family, co-workers, and beyond, our kindnesses great and small are the second pillar of our Christian faith. They do not define it for us, they don't give it, but they define it for others, and as Amos reminds us, we forget that at our peril. Many of the problems are systemic, they're bigger than we can handle. That's fine,

God does not expect you to change a country or even a town. He expects you to let the righteousness He gives you flow down, pour out, trickle-down economics except that it actually means something. Jesus gives, we then turn and pass it along. There's a song about that I think.

So what is justice to a Christian? All this is fine, blustery, and chest-thumping, and I feel like a total fraud for saying any of it when my life is such a mess, if I'm honest, but it's my job. What is justice to a Christian? Is it simply the wrong getting punished, the good being honored? No. It is that, but not just that. Our understanding of justice does not concern itself with fairness, in fact it flies in the face of most of what the world would preach at us. To see Christian justice, look to Jesus and what God does with Him and us. Justice, as I've said to death, would've been to sweep it all away into the fire. God didn't do that. He went for a different kind of justice, one based on mercy and substitution. Instead of straight up punishment, He opted for a course that we could survive, He opted for a remake of the human soul. He didn't just lash out. He didn't try to burn things down. He provided the means for justice through His own sacrifice, and we would do well to remember that. Christian justice means giving up. Christian justice means dispensing with things dear and precious to us. That is what our savior did. He dispensed with His own life, and instead of choosing the instant gratification of immediate punishment, He took the long, slow road of redemption. Justice for individuals, fair treatment of institutions, for a Christian to do this, they must always be counterweighted by mercy. We don't lash out in punishment when we are hurt, we forgive and reconcile instead. We don't seek our own good, but our neighbor's good.

The justice Christ shows to us is the justice of taking the punishment for our sins upon the cross. The justice we show to our neighbor is the same. Christ tells us to take up our crosses, which is often taken for suffering, but Amos reminds us that the cross we take up is sometimes the cross of sacrifice. Giving up those things we held dear. Giving up our anger, our vengeance, and our despair.

But we don't do it without precedent. We walk the road because He walked it Himself. He guides us along that road every step, His own forgiveness, His own mercy to you, lighting your way.

Amen.