

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
28 September 2025

Amos 6:1a, 4-7 and Luke 16:19-31

There are great similarities between the reading from Amos and the Gospel for today. It is as though Luke gives us an illustration to show what Amos was trying to say. Before we talk about these comparisons, let us have a bit of context about Amos. He was a shepherd and farmer who lived near the border of the Northern and Southern kingdom of Israel around the year 760 to 750 before the birth of Christ. About 150 years before, around the year 910 BCE, the Northern Kingdom had separated from the rest of Israel, taking ten of the 12 tribes of Jacob with them. The Northern kingdom had been victorious in battle under their king, Jeroboam II and had advanced their borders considerably. They were wealthy and successful, but the prophets of the day considered Jeroboam II a wicked and evil king. His wealth had desensitized him to the needs of his people, he allowed idol worship in the land, and there was great injustices committed against the poor.

Amos was called by God from his farm to preach a message of judgement against Israel, although he was not a prophet or a prophet's son. He went to Bethel, an important city of Israel, and started preaching against the nation's evil. The book is a collection of sermons, poems, and visions over the span of a few years. The scrolls were collected later and put into a book form to memorialize God's judgement against Israel. One of Amos' most important accusations against the wealthy of Israel is that they ignore the poor, sell them into slavery for their inability to pay their debts, and then proceed to deny them legal representation. "Amos asks, 'Is this the family that was once denied justice and enslaved in Egypt? The family God rescued from oppression and slavery? God is done putting up with you!'" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGgWaPGpGz4>).

Now, let us look at the passage for today. It starts, "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria." As I said before, this is a time of great security and progress in Israel. Times are good, money is rolling in for the wealthy, and they have a strong government to protect them from invaders. The wealthy are truly living on easy street. They "lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches," they eat meat every day, while most people eat it only on festivals, and they lounge lazily in their spacious homes, singing songs to the sound of the harp, and composing music like David used to do. They are like kings and queens, unpreoccupied by anything that may be happening outside of the gates of their homes. This excess is symbolized by the expression, "drinking wine

from bowls and anointing themselves with the finest oils,” Not just goblets, but bowls. Not just soap, but the finest of make-up. Reading this, I forget for a second that this scene is taking place 2800 years ago, and not this last weekend in New York City or some of the homes in our own neighborhoods.

In the meantime, these people have forgotten about the plight of Joseph, meaning the deplorable living conditions of the poor and the great injustices taking place against them throughout Israel. Today, Amos is telling them, “The banquets are over. You will be the first to be exiled! You will be held to account for the injustices you are committing and for your idolatry.” Those who know history know what happened next. Within thirty years, in 727 BCE, the Northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire, and those tribes disappeared to history completely. They were assimilated into the nations and ceased to be the chosen people of God. It is at this point that the South takes on the name, “Israel.”

Jesus today in the Gospel of Luke takes on the same teaching of Amos and gives us an illustration of what this feasting may have looked like. The man in this story, “was dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day.” He wears colors reserved for royalty and the very wealthy. He feasted sumptuously, not just at festivals or at Sabbath dinners, but every day. The word “sumptuously” probably means banquets with a variety of rich foods and wine, where he would have been surrounded by his family and other rich friends.

In the meantime, on the other side of the gate laid a figure who represents all the poor, sick, isolated, and forgotten people of Israel. He is starving, he is covered in sores, and he longs even for the scraps falling from the rich man’s table. This type of hunger is debilitating and attacks more than just the belly. It attacks your sense of worth, your self-esteem, your place within a society and within the temple. It fills your heart with shame and reduces you to the status of discarded furniture. The poor become like objects no one sees, and everyone tries hard to avoid. It is as though righteous people and the wealthy are afraid of becoming contaminated, infected by poverty or somehow made less of who they are by their interactions with “those people on the corner or outside my gate.”

Luke then paints a scene that could well have come from Dante’s Divine Comedy. Both the rich and the poor men died. One goes to Hades, the place of the dead, where he is being tormented. The beggar goes to Abraham’s bosom. The interesting thing is that even in Hades, the formerly rich man sees himself as superior to the beggar. He says to Abraham, “send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” Lazarus remains at best a servant whose only job is to serve him and comfort him. After this, Abraham informs the formerly rich

person of the reversal that has taken place on the other side of this life. “During your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.” Still not understanding what’s really happening, the man asks that Lazarus be sent on a rescue mission to save his five brothers, “that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Abraham says, “They have the Scriptures, they should listen to them!” The formerly rich man insists, “No, they will not, but if someone who is dead returns to life, they will believe.” Then, Luke, a big tongue in cheek, has Abraham say, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

I say that Luke speaks “tongue in cheek” when using the expression, “They will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead,” because he is writing his Gospel 50 years after the death and resurrection of the Son of God. Someone has in fact risen from the dead, and many Judeans (perhaps most) have not come to believe. They are not convinced that Messiah has come, they are not convinced that what we do on this earth matters greatly to God, they feel comfortably protected by their wealth and ignore what 1 Timothy 6 tells us today, “we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it”.

Now we come to our own day, and we have to draw parallels to our present condition. Despite our high unemployment, foreign debt, and market volatility, we remain one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Our democratic experiment has been a huge economic success, and we now have more billionaires per square inch than any other nation on the planet. Many of us lead lives of ease, comforted by our wealth and status. And like Amos, preachers find it very difficult to preach caution or judgement in the midst of unbridled economic success. Yet, we must affirm what the Gospel and the Prophet affirm. We have a responsibility for the poor, the sick, the disenfranchised, the unprotected, and the lost. To preach this is not to preach socialism, it is to preach the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. All of us together, both governments and citizens, have the responsibility to create safety nets for those who are not as blessed as we are. Christians are responsible for being our brothers and our sisters keepers. To be a disciple means to bear fruits worthy of the Master we follow. Fruits of kindness, justice, forgiveness, and compassion.

All wealth is transitory; it is here one day and gone the next. God gives us wealth that we may be a blessing to others. This is what it means to follow a Messiah who gave it all for the salvation of the world. Generosity is not something we do, but who we are called to be in the Messiah.

May he continue to bless you. Amen!