



Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times—Amos
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; June 28, 2026
 Amos 5:1, 18-24; James:14-17

A few weeks ago, before our 250th Anniversary Celebration of these United States and my week of vacation, we began our summer sermon series, *Holy Disruption: Ancient Prophets for Modern Times*. This series grew out of something I've heard many times throughout my ministry: "I don't have much use for the Old Testament." Some people find it difficult to understand. Others struggle with its violence, unfamiliar history, or questions about relevance. Yet, the Hebrew Bible is filled with voices that still speak to our lives today—especially the prophets—who speak into times marked by political turmoil, economic inequality, social division, and spiritual complacency. The prophets are not fortune tellers predicting the future. They're truth tellers who challenge God's people to see the world through God's eyes and to imagine what life could look like if faithfulness, mercy, and justice truly shape their communities.

When we began with Isaiah, we encountered a prophet who stood before the holiness of God and discovered that grace comes before calling. Isaiah wasn't chosen because he had

everything together. God touched him, forgave him, and then called him. And Isaiah responded, “Here am I; send me.” But Isaiah was only the beginning. Today we meet Amos—a prophet who does what prophets often do best: he speaks the truth nobody wants to hear. Prophets have a way of pointing to the thing everyone else is trying to ignore. They ask the uncomfortable questions when everyone would rather change the subject, and because of that, prophets are not generally popular. They are often seen as a drag, a downer and, certainly a danger to the status quo.

By the time Amos appears on the scene, around 755 B.C., God's people have long been divided into two kingdoms. Israel in the north is larger, wealthier, and politically stronger. Judah in the south is smaller and less prosperous, but it is from Judah that God calls Amos. Amos is not a priest, a king, or a professional religious leader. He is a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees. Yet from this simple, quiet life, God calls him to leave home and travel north to Israel with a difficult message—and at the heart of that message is a question that still confronts us today: What good is worship if it never changes the way we live?

Amos is often remembered for the powerful words found in our reading today from chapter 5: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Truth be told, even folks who are not biblically literate are familiar with these words since they are echoed in Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Sounds strong—hopeful—but they are words first uttered from the lips of a prophet who is deeply troubled by what he sees.

It’s important to note that Amos prophesies during a time when Israel is experiencing political stability and economic prosperity. Business is booming. The nation is expanding. While many people assume their success is proof of God’s blessing, Amos sees another reality. For beneath the prosperity is exploitation. The rich are growing richer while those without power are pushed further to the margins. The poor are being crushed—so much so—debt forces vulnerable people into slavery. Ultimately, Israel has confused prosperity with righteousness. They have confused success with faithfulness, and Amos is sent to set them straight—to let them know in no uncertain terms—that God’s judgment is fast approaching.

Looking back, we know that Amos's warnings are not empty words because within about forty years, the Assyrian Empire will sweep in, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel will no longer exist. What seems unthinkable during a season of prosperity will become a painful reality. But Amos cannot see the future the way we see the past. He simply sees what others around him refuse to see. Even though leaders and citizens celebrate their success, Amos notices the cracks beneath the surface—the injustice, the greed, and the spiritual complacency that threaten the very soul of the nation.

The hard work of the prophet is to see circumstances from God's point of view and to speak out—come what may. The prophet speaks before the consequences arrive. Often, the prophet names what is broken while there is still time for healing—telling the truth not because they enjoy being the bearer of bad news, but because they believe God's people are capable of something better. So, despite ridicule and resistance, Amos raises his voice to deliver God's message “for such a time as this.”

That brings us to Amos's message. Amos begins his preaching in a way that probably makes his audience quite happy. He names Israel's neighboring nations—one by one—and announces God's judgment against them: Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab—before finally landing on Judah—the Southern Kingdom Israel has dominated for well over a hundred years. You can almost hear the crowd: “That's right, Amos! You tell them!” Because it's easy to celebrate God's judgment when it's directed at someone else, isn't it? It's comforting to imagine that God loves the people we love, blesses the people we bless, and stands against the people we oppose.

But then Amos does something unexpected. He pivots—does a 180 if you will—and suddenly, God's attention is no longer focused on Israel's enemies. It's focused on Israel. And what is the accusation? Amos accuses God's people of trampling the poor, denying justice to the vulnerable, and building their comfort on the suffering of others. Then Amos speaks some of the harshest words in Scripture attributed to God: “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord?” The people believe the day of the Lord will be a day of victory for them. But Yahweh warns that it will not be light—it will be darkness. It will be like someone escaped from a lion only to be attacked by a bear—or found safety in their home only to rest their hand against a wall to be bitten by a snake. And then, these words:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, 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.

Make no mistake. God is enraged—not because of Israel's worship—but because their worship has nothing to do with how they live their lives. There's a total disconnect! Yes, they gather for worship. They sing their songs. They bring their offerings. But outside the sanctuary, they ignore those who are hurting and exploit those who have the greatest need. God's anger is further observed later in chapter 4 when Amos proclaims, “Prepare to meet your God, O Israel.”

God's anger is not rooted in wounded pride, nor is it from a desire to condemn. It springs from God's deep and abiding love for God's people. It is the cry of a God who refuses to look away when human beings are harmed. Throughout Scripture, God consistently draws near to those most vulnerable—the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the foreigner, the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. These are the people who occupy a special place in God's heart. So, when they are

exploited, forgotten, or pushed aside, God does not remain silent. God sees. God grieves. And, through Amos, God speaks.

Earlier I mentioned that the heart of the message Amos brings is a question we still confront today: What good is worship if it never changes the way we live? The truest measure of our worship is not what happens here in the sanctuary but how we treat one another when we leave here. For when God says, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” God is indicating that worship and justice are not to be separated.

So, what good news does Amos have for us in the twenty-first century—gathered in this sacred space—either in person or virtually? At first glance, it may be hard to find. Amos offers little in the way of easy comfort. Instead, he challenges us, unsettles us, and disrupts our assumptions about ourselves, our worship, and the world around us. But maybe that is precisely the gift. Because there are times when God's people need to be awakened. There are times when complacency settles in, when we become too comfortable with the way things are, and our vision grows dim. In such moments, feathers need to be ruffled. Pots need to be stirred. That is one of the gifts of the prophets. They help us see what we would rather ignore, so that we can become what God is yearning for us to be. And if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, Amos reminds us why all of this matters. God hasn't stopped caring about how human beings treat one another. God hasn't accepted injustice as simply the way things are. God loves the world too much to leave it as it is, and God loves us too much to leave us as we are.

It seems to me that the opposite of love is indifference—and there is nothing indifferent about God. The God who speaks through Amos is still calling us to build communities where dignity is honored, where the vulnerable are protected, and where worship overflows into lives of compassion and justice. Because worship does not end when we leave this sanctuary. Worship continues when our hearts are changed and our hands are eager to serve. Every time we feed a hungry neighbor, welcome a stranger, include someone society is excluding, advocate for someone who has no one to speak up for them, or choose compassion over self-interest, we become part of the answer to Amos's prayer. Little by little, justice begins to roll. Little by little, righteousness begins to flow. And perhaps that is the holy disruption Amos offers us still. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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