

“Is It Flush?”  
Amos 7:7-17  
Sermon Preached by Thomas P. Markey  
John Knox Presbyterian Church  
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So, the time has finally arrived! The seminary student, who strategically chose this text, has an opportunity to preach to the congregation about issues of social justice. It is, in many ways, this seminary student’s dream. Finally, after all of the reading and writing and discussing issues of social justice, I have the opportunity to finally preach about social justice. Quite frankly, I could not have chosen a more predictable path. Amos – the biblical champion of social justice – is our text of conversation for today. Are you ready?! Aren’t you all SO excited?!

For the sake of transparency, this had been my initial angle. I had my platforms ready, my fierce words prepared, and my divisive rhetoric calculated. I was prepared to scold us all through a slew of scornful and seething sentences.

But as I began my initial preparations on this sermon – and by initial I mean five pages – I found my words falling flat and my passion feeling inauthentic. It all felt off, out of line, out of sync, and unlevel with the realities of my heart. While it is undeniable reality that our text today calls for a turn towards justice in the face of injustice, it is my hope that our journey for justice can be done together in solidarity.

In the midst of having just celebrated a holiday weekend, one likely filled with family and friends, delicious food, sleeping in, and, best of all, no work on Monday, Amos’ direct, divisive, and blunt words to us today come as a bit of a shock. They snap us back to reality faster than an early Tuesday morning meeting following a long weekend. Clearly, Amos isn’t interested in our calm comfort and quaint contentment. Amos doesn’t care about easing us into the week or keeping us cozy in the comfort of our pews. Simply put, Amos has a word to preach and, whether we are prepared to hear it or not, Amos is going to preach.

Widely considered the earliest of the prophetic books, the book of Amos draws us into the “unique tradition in the history of religion: prophecies of the approaching end of the existence of God’s people based upon God’s judgment of them of failing to live according to divine standards” (Gowan, 339). We see this tradition continued in the books of Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah, and the early portions of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. While this tradition finds prevalence throughout the testimony of Scripture, most scholars agree that Amos has no predecessors, making the book of Amos, as one commentator writes, “one of the most important turning points in the history of the religion of Israel” (Gowan, 339). For those of us with contemporary eyes and ears, perhaps the most profound characteristic we notice when

reading from the book of Amos is “the power of its language and the passion of its concern for the oppressed” (Gowan, 339).

Powerful and passionate, we know very little about the biography of Amos, however, as Scripture tells us Amos “was among the sheepbreeders of Tekoa.” (1:1) And, as we heard read today, Amos himself tells us, “but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees.” (7:14) From his hometown of Tekoa, a town in Judah approximately ten miles south of Jerusalem, Amos, the southerner, is commissioned to prophesy against the northern kingdom of Israel.

It is believed that Amos is prophesying during the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah (783-742 BCE) and Jeroboam, king of Israel (785-745 BCE). As a result, most scholars date the book of Amos to have been written between 760 and 750 BCE. This is an important detail - For Amos to have been prophesying during this time is to assume that Amos was spreading his prophetic testimony during a time of relative stability and prosperity. However, in the midst of this stability and prosperity, there is, as Amos will reveal, undeniable suffering and painful injustices taking place.

Dr. M. Daniel Carroll Rodas, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament at Denver Seminary, summarizes the book of Amos in this way,

“The fundamental message is that the all-powerful God will judge Israel because of its social injustice and military pride. The national religion propounded a view of the Lord that sanctioned a distorted view of reality. Confident in God’s sure provision and protection, the people crowded the sanctuaries for celebrations. But the god of their rituals and temples was a very different deity, not the God of the exodus. Israel’s political, economic, and religious system stood condemned: the military pretense would be exposed as groundless, the powerful punished for their oppression of the poor, and the sanctuaries destroyed” (M. Daniel Carroll R., 503).

As many of you know, the youth just recently returned from a mission trip in West Virginia. During our time there, among many tasks, we spent the week building roofs, wheelchair ramps, and decks. An incredibly important part in all of this work was ensuring that our work was level. After a slew of meticulous measurements, we would put the piece of wood in place and then, using a level much larger than this, we ensured that our measurements were, in fact, level. Once level, we frantically grabbed our drills and put the screws in place. We then moved onto the next piece of wood, going through the same process of leveling our work. In the same way, by ensuring that our work was level, we were able to ensure that our work was kept “flush,” meaning one piece of wood matched up perfectly with the other piece of wood, creating a completely level and even surface, leaving a smooth surface with no gaps between the two pieces of wood. By the end of the week it seemed as though the only question we ever asked each other was, “Is it flush?”

Being that this recent work is still very much fresh on my mind, I found myself drawn especially drawn towards the opening verses of our text, “This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Our prophetic announcement from Amos today declares a world that is not appropriately or sufficiently leveled. Israel has not kept itself flush with God’s deepest desires and wishes for the world. As a result, they must be held accountable, “Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land” (7:17).

The question then must be asked, if we were to take a level to our world, would we find ourselves in line? Would we be firmly flush? Or, would we be devastatingly out of line, painfully unlevel? Would our world, in its contemporary context, find itself, just as Israel had, unable to keep itself flush with God’s calling on our lives?

In light of the recent events in our country it seems as though we are, in fact, not flush. We have failed to respond to the world with the all-encompassing love, boundless grace, and reconciling mercy that God so deeply yearns for.

So often, it is easy to feel like Amaziah. Afraid of and made uneasy by the words of Amos, we respond with angst and anxiety, shooing the problem away saying as Amaziah did, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom” (7:12-13).

Desmond Tutu famously stated, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” The prophetic witness and testimony of Amos calls on all of God’s people to speak out and speak up. Amos warns us against being silent in the face of injustice, “Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time” (5:13).

Thus, as the Church, we must cry out against the injustices of our world. In our cries, as Amos writes, we must “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). The current state of injustice in our country must stir in our hearts a desire to proclaim our own prophetic testimonies of justice and righteousness. Through these testimonies we come to affirm the life-giving and life-affirming love, fellowship, and communion of the Holy Spirit.

In drawing from the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians, “may [we] lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to [God], as [we] bear fruit in every good work and as [we] grow in the knowledge of God. May [we] be made strong with all the strength that comes from [God’s] glorious power, and may [we] be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to [God], who has enabled [us] to share

in the inheritance of the saints in the light. [God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of [God's] beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:10-14)

Friends, let us go out to be the salt of the Earth and light of the world. And, as we continue to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness [flow] like an ever-flowing stream" may they be waters that flow rivers of the living water - water that builds life, sustains life, affirms life, and gives life.

For when we do, as the Book of Amos concludes, "The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord your God" (9:13-15). Amen.