

“A Roar from Zion”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24
November 12, 2017

You’ve sat down to your wonderful Thanksgiving dinner, the grace has been said, and you ask for the sweet potatoes to be passed, and then you realize that your family’s very own Amos is the one nearest to that dish, and you know you’re in for it. What follows is a seven-minute lecture on the difference between yams and sweet potatoes, and any injustice in the history of humanity that relates in some small way to sweet potatoes. And all you can think is “they’re getting cold!”

Every family has an Amos. They can’t let you eat a meal, catch a football game, enjoy a movie, watch the news, or read a book without telling you everything you never wanted to know that is wrong with what you’re doing.

If you find yourself thinking, “Well, we don’t have anyone like that in our family!” you might be very lucky. Or I have some hard news for you: You might be the Amos. I know, because I have absolutely been the Amos. It happens to the best of us. Some of us grow out of it completely, though few of those who do are preachers. Amos himself never did.

I once heard a professor of Hebrew Bible say that if you like Amos, you almost certainly don’t understand him. He’s a shepherd from the southern kingdom of Judah sent to be a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel. So he’s an outsider, a carpetbagger, a pain-in-the-keister. But he is sent to bring a message from God “to seek good and not evil,” to seek life and not death.

Amos says that God is roaring like an angry lion from Zion. Awwww, yeah — we’re getting some of that wrathful “Old Testament God” going on! There’s judgment here, and it sweeps across the pastures and withers them and dries up the top of Mount Carmel. The very earth is crumbling because of what God is so furious about.

So what is it that God wants? We hear the instruction to “establish justice in the gate.” The gate was, literally, the gate of the wall surrounding the city. There, the elders would gather each day and hear the disputes of the people. Then, like now, your chances of success in this court could be drastically hampered by your financial status and your access to quality representation. Justice in the gate was lacking, according to the roar from Zion.

Our reading skips over the short piece of chapter two where Amos goes into detail about Israel’s sins. Turns out they were enslaving people in debt, partying with money extracted from the vulnerable, denying justice-seekers due process, “[trampling] the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,” and exploiting women. *You know, there are days when a preacher just can’t connect the ancient world to the modern one!*

Well, sure, all of that sounds lion's-roar-judgment worthy. It's in the last few verses of our reading that Amos makes us uncomfortable. The prophet says that God hates the festivals, the solemn assemblies, the offerings, even the music of worship. God won't accept any of it, and will not listen to the melody of the gathered people singing praise. It turns out that God hates the hypocrisy associated with the people's religion. *I don't know, I just can't make any connections this week.*

Amos wants his hearers to know that God isn't up in heaven tuning into worship services, smiling holy ear to holy ear, just enjoying all the adulation. No, what God really wants is for hearts to be changed to bring about justice. And not just a little bit of justice. Not a puddle of justice. Not trickle-down justice. What God wants is for us to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Remember this when you are tempted to separate the Hebrew Scriptures from the New Testament in terms of God's character: The God of Israel wants justice and righteousness to flow, and until it does, God is not interested in ritual and pomp and circumstance. The God we meet in the Hebrew Bible doesn't even want to be *praised* by the powerful who are stepping on the necks of the voiceless.

There are a few lush, river-flowing parts of Israel. But much of the country is dry. Drought and low-rainfall would have been common. The Israelites know *wadis* — dry riverbeds that are only filled part of the year. The idea of justice flowing like a torrent of water — a constant stream of doing what is right — would have been a compelling and convicting image.

The lion has roared from Zion and that hot breath withers the land of those who have punched down, taking advantage of the ones with less power and fewer resources. God demands that the people relieve the parched land with rolling cascades of justice and a never-stopping flow of righteousness.

I was planning to preach about stewardship this week. I was going to talk about a congregation that seeks justice and righteousness and, with a smile, remind you to give generously over the last two months of 2017 and to be sure and pledge for 2018.

Those plans went out the window last Sunday afternoon, when I learned of the shootings at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. Suddenly, I had a new focus. And then, through the rest of the week, more and more allegations of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault by beloved celebrities surfaced. That needs to be addressed from the pulpit. And then we had a visit from Birmingham AIDS Outreach on Wednesday, and another vulnerable population got my attention. And Thursday came, and Friday, and it wasn't the allegations about a not-a-judge running for the U.S. Senate that made me rethink everything again. Instead, it was the response to these allegations by those that claim the Christian moral high ground in our state. I heard excuses for the exploitation of children, and I heard scripture cited in them. I heard Jesus's own name invoked to explain away the idea of child abuse. I heard the vulnerable being trampled at the gates and being sold down the river for the impotent glory of political power.

The Lord roars from Zion. Christians worship across this beautiful state this morning, but I fear God is not amused with our priorities and our will. And there are kids in this county getting kicked out of their

homes in God's name because of how they express identity and love. And those our nation truly worships — famous people — are being found to be false idols, unable to even apologize with integrity. And all the way back to Sutherland Springs, we are unable to have a substantive conversation about how to reduce the amount of gun violence in our country. There are powerful people who will not let any questions at all be brought to the gates.

I honestly don't know what the answer is on that last one. But I know that we are obsessed with guns, and with violence, and so when these things happen, all we are really willing to offer is that beloved noisy song that goes so nicely with the melody of harps — the feeble, tired tune that goes “we're sending our thoughts and prayers.”

The roar comes from Zion:

I hate, I despise your thoughts, and I take no delight in your prayers. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

So what are we to do? I believe when our world's priorities are amiss, we are called to be like Amos. We are called to witness to the brokenness of the world and to be clear about what the Gospel response ought to be. “Witness” sounds like a daunting word, like you've got to go show up at a rally or a protest or a sit-in. And for some of us, that's exactly what we need to do. But witness is broader than that. I think a modern definition would be that witness means doing something more than shaking your fist at the world or sharing a Facebook post or retweeting someone else's words. Witness is not easy, because it leaves you vulnerable, and after all, you know what the world does with vulnerability.

Witness might mean writing a letter to someone with power to let them know they're accountable. It might mean intervening in a situation — speaking up. Maybe you saw the ad that Burger King released a couple of weeks ago. They did that hidden camera “What would you do?” thing, and the setup was that they had actors in a restaurant bullying a high school junior, and they had an employee selling Whopper Juniors that had been smushed. According to the ad, 95% of customers spoke up and complained about the “bullied” hamburger. And 12% intervened on behalf of the human.

Witness might mean talking to a child about violence and asking them to think about it in an age-appropriate, critical way. It might mean talking to girls about their God-given right to exist in their God-given bodies and to flourish and to be themselves and to demand respect. And it might mean talking to boys about the highly toxic version of masculinity that includes the urge to dominate, the devaluation of women, the suppression of anything that looks like an emotion, and severe self-reliance. Talking to the kids in the church about the mess that the world is might be the most important witness of all.

And maybe my stewardship sermon doesn't need to completely get put aside. The gospel truth is that we are called again in every generation to turn this ship around and to create a new world with the waterfalls of justice and unending river of righteousness that our God commands. And so this congregation needs your money, yes, to support ministries that feed the hungry and protect the

vulnerable and advocate for the voiceless. And we need your gifts to have our own witness on this corner in worship and teaching our children and learning new truths about the world. But we also need your voice. And your energy. And your courage to speak up when you see or hear something that doesn't jibe with your experience. And your willingness to have open ears and humble hearts that know that your experience isn't the only one. We need your righteousness and your justice — every drop you've got — and we promise to be good stewards of what you bring.

Together, we chip away at a story that proclaims that all the news is bad: that death and violence and fear and misogyny and the trampling of the vulnerable are just the facts of life. And we proclaim the truth of our God instead: that death has no power and that there are reservoirs of wholeness and comfort and abundance and grace and lovingkindness just aching to break forth.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus stands in the temple — right there in Zion — and proclaims, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Amen.