**Amos: How to Measure a Life**

Let me start with a question. What is the boldest thing you ever had to say to someone? What’s the one statement that you made that took more guts than you knew you had? Perhaps it’s easier to ask what’s the boldest thing you wished you had said to someone?

The Bible is filled with examples of people who spoke words of amazing boldness. Remember David, as a teenager he said this to the face of the 3 meter tall giant, “*You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defiled. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head*.”

When John the Baptist met the religious leaders of his day, this was his greeting to them, “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. . . The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire*.”

The apostle Paul was another person known for his bold words and this morning we are going to meet a man named Amos, who will speak some of the boldest words recorded in the Bible. Amos lived around 750 B.C. in a town called Tekoa near Bethlehem. He was not a priest, or a judge, or even a full-time prophet. He simply says in his book that he was a shepherd who received a message from God. Amos was one of the earliest ‘writing prophets’, that is, he recorded his own words that he spoke.

So, turn in your Bibles with me to the book of Amos and we’ll see what he said. Now, one more bit of information that you need is that Amos was from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, but God gave him a message for the Northern Kingdom and he told him to go to the capital Samaria. Now, at this time, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was experiencing a period of economic prosperity and political success unknown since the days of King Solomon. Things were going good and most were happy with life.

So, when this prophet from the Southern Kingdom shows up in Samaria, you can be sure they were wondering what he was going to say? **<ARROW>** Let’s start in verse 3.

*This is what the LORD says:* *For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth,4 I will send fire upon the house of Hazael that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad. 5 I will break down the gate of Damascus; I will destroy the king who is in the Valley of Aven and the one who holds the scepter in Beth Eden. The people of Aram will go into exile to Kir," says the Lord.*

Now Damascus was not part of Israel, it was in Syria as it is today and they were one of their bittermost enemies. So, when Amos pronounces judgment on Damascus you can imagine the people saying, “Hey! I like this new prophet! He must be from God because he is speaking against our enemies! Let’s hear what else he has to say” So, Amos continues pronouncing judgment on enemy after enemy. In verse 6, it’s the people of Gaza. In verse 9, it’s the people of Tyre. And he goes on to mention the people of Edom, Ammon, and Moab.

And in each case, Amos begins by naming the enemy nation using the phrase ‘*For three sins of (then he names the city or nation), even four, I will not turn back my wrath*.’ Then he goes on to tell how each nation has offended God; what they have done wrong. And the phrase ‘for three sins and for four has a specific meaning’. In English, we might say something like ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back’ meaning you keep loading straw on a camel’s back and you keep loading until you add 1 straw too many and the camel collapses. And God is saying that the people have gone too far and now God was going to bring judgment on them.

And as Amos continues to pronounce judgment on their enemies you can almost hear the crowd saying, “You go, Amos! Preach it, brother! Amen! Tell them what’s coming!” Then Amos pronounces judgment on Judah, the Southern Kingdom and his own homeland. But it’s during this time of civil war, so they are considered another enemy and they continue the high fives and applause. And all along, they are thinking that they are righteous and loved by God and that every other nation is evil and deserves God’s judgment. They are thrilled that God is finally going to step in and punish the nations for their sin. This was all good news to Israel. But what comes next is going to shock them. Look at chapter 2 verse 6. **<ARROW>**

*This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of* ***Israel****”,* And when Amos says those words, you can hear a pin drop. Now, they’re thinking. ‘But we are God’s chosen people. He can’t be judging us just like we’re one of his enemies.’ But that is exactly what God is saying. He is accusing Israel of living as though they were enemies of God. And what is the last straw here? What is the third and fourth sin that push God over the limit? Let’s continue reading.

*For three sins of Israel even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge.*

What’s the main sin here? Why is God going to judge them? It’s the way they are treating the poor. It is a time of prosperity and yet, the poor and the oppressed are suffering at the hands of the middle and upper classes. They sell the needy for a pair of sandals. If a poor person owes them money, they would have them sold into slavery to pay the debt so that they could buy a pair of sandals. People had grown so cold that a human life wasn’t worth as much as a pair of sandals. It’s a classic case of the people in power living in luxury while poverty exists all around them and they don’t care.

Notice what God doesn’t say here. He doesn’t say that they don’t worship enough. He doesn’t say that they don’t read the scriptures enough or that they don’t give sacrifices to Him. God is saying, “My heart is broken over the way my people hoard their resources and neglect the poor while they claim to follow and know me.”

This has always been a priority for God. Do you remember God’s plan for the nation of Israel when they settled the Promised Land. He gave them certain laws to make sure everyone would be taken cared for. First of all, he divided the land up evenly for each of the tribes based on their populations and every family received their own land. There was one tribe that didn’t get any land, the tribe of Levi which was where the priests came from. So, to take care of them he commanded everyone to give a tenth of their income to support their needs. And every third year, that tithe was to be saved for the poor in the land. But God also knew that people would naturally take advantage of others and some people would get into debt and be sold as slaves to pay the debt off. So, every 7 years, he commanded that all the slaves be set free and all debts cancelled. And every 50 years, it was the year of jubilee where property rights were returned to the original owners. So, you could only ‘rent’ property from someone, but the property could never be bought outright. Think about it. If a nation follows these laws, there would be no poverty. There would be a constant redistribution of wealth from the people that have to those that do not.

And not only that, but God also gave them gleaning laws. Look at these verses from Deuteronomy 24. **<ARROW>**

*When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. 20 When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. 21 When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.*

There is no way to miss the refrain from this passage. God specifically mentions 3 people groups over and over: the alien, the fatherless, and the widow. Why is God so concerned for these groups of people?

Aliens were people who immigrated into the land of Israel. They were not ethnic Jews, so they did not have the same rights and privileges and they would not have land rights like the other Israelites. The fatherless were those who had been orphaned and had no one to provide for them or to look out for them. The widows were women who had lost their husbands; in the patriarchal society in which they lived, these people were without legal and political power and usually they were the poor.

In our day, we might call them the marginalized people. They are the groups that will most likely be forgotten, mistreated, and oppressed, if someone doesn’t speak up. So God speaks up because he is concerned for them and he commands for their care and support.

Every society has groups like this. It may be the alien, the fatherless, and the widows. But it might be senior citizens, immigrants, people of a certain race or color, or it might be people with physical or mental disabilities. And it’s our responsibility to find out who it is in our society is being mistreated and then to extend the compassion and the love of God to them. We need to seek justice for those who are treated with injustice.

God says that he will judge a nation by the way it treats these groups of people. I think it is a wonderful testimony for Sweden that this nation takes such good care of these marginalized people. Maybe the reasons the politicians do this are more humanistic in nature than godly, but the result is that a transfer of wealth occurs every year at tax time and the poorest and weakest in the society are taken care of. And God likes that.

God makes it unmistakably clear that He takes it on himself to be the protector of the weak and the outcasts in a society. Anybody who neglects them neglects him. Anybody who oppresses them oppresses him. Throughout the Old Testament God expresses his heart toward the poor and invites us to join in his commitment to bring love and justice to those who often don’t receive it.

So, Amos hits the people of Israel right between the eyes. He lets them know that God sees their greed and mistreatment of the poor. There was a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots; a gap that God had specifically ordered provisions to prevent from happening. In fact, archeologists have found that houses built in the centuries right after the Promised Land was settled are fairly equal in size. But by the time we reach Amos’ day in the eighth century B.C., archeologists find evidence of enormous mansions for the rich and miserable shacks for the poor.

And over time they had also begun to build summer and winter homes. They invested all their money into creating luxurious places to live and they had nothing left over to give to the poor. And God even speaks a judgment specifically against this in chapter 3 verse 15. He says, “*I will tear down the winter house along with the summer house; the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed and the mansions will be demolished*.”

God is going to right the wrong and bring justice. And we all like stories like that. Robin Hood is famous for this. There’s another story about a mayor of Chicago named Richard Daley, who was known for his great self-confidence and arrogance. One day, he was approached by one of his speech writers who said, “Mayor Daley, I’m not making enough money to support my family.” But Daley’s response was, “I’m not going to give you any more money. It ought to be enough that you work for a great American hero like me.” And that was the end of the discussion. Or so he thought.

Well, several weeks later. Mayor Daley was on his way to give a speech and he was famous for never reading his speeches before he got up to deliver them. In this case, he got up to give a speech to a large group of war veterans at a Veteran’s day celebration, which was getting national press coverage.

So, Daley began his speech and as he delivered it, he was quite impressed with how eloquent and passionate it was. He talked about how everyone had forgotten the war veterans and that he cared for them. Then he said, “Today I am proposing a seventeen point program at the national, state, and city-wide level to take care of the veterans in our country.”

Now at this point, everyone was on the edge of their seats reading to find out what this great 17-point program was all about. The truth is, at this point Mayor Daley was pretty interested himself, so he couldn’t wait to turn the page and find out what he was going to say next. But as he turned the page over, all he saw were these words, “You’re on your own now, you great American hero.”

Justice. Compassion. This is what God calls us to show to the needy people around us. But sometimes, like Mayor Daley, we can grow cold and callous to people less fortunate than us. It’s easy to ignore please for help. To close our ears and hearts.

And Amos uses some harsh language with the people to try to wake them up and get them to listen. He says this to specifically to some of the wealthy women in chapter 4, verse 1. **<ARROW>**

*Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!"*

Now calling a woman a cow is not a compliment in any society and it was not appreciated by these wives of the wealthy and powerful in Samaria. But it was not just random name calling. Think about the nature of a cow for a moment. Cows are not noted for their good works. They are known for constantly grazing. They have 4 stomachs and are eating machines. They are walking appetites that only consume. The only question on a cow’s mind is “How can I get more?”

We live in a society that often encourages us to live like the cows of Bashan. It’s not as bad here as in the states, but we are often bombarded by advertisements that entice us to get a nicer home, or a newer car, or earn more money. There is always one more thing to buy. People devote their lives to these endeavors and they never once question if there is something more to life. They are walking appetites. And just because we are Christians doesn’t mean we are immune to this disease.

And the deeper problem for the people of Israel was that they made no connection between their treatment of the poor and their relationship with God. So, imagine the shock when they hear Amos claiming that God says that He hates their worship. They have never heard such a thing. But take a look at chapter 5:21.  **<ARROW>**

 *I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs!  I will not listen to the music of your harps.*

God is saying to the people, “Your worship and your lives can’t be separated. You can’t oppress the weak, forget the poor and then show up for church as if God doesn’t notice any of your behavior. God is clear that injustice to people and authentic worship cannot coexist in the life of someone who follows Jesus. Then God tells them in the next verse 24 what He does expect. It’s one of the great statements in all the Bible and it reveals the heart of God.

*But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!*

There’s one type of worship that God can never get enough of: when we bring justice and compassion and righteousness to our neighbors in need. God loves that type of worship. Are there hungry people? Give them something to eat. Are there people with no roof over their heads? Give them a place to sleep. Are there sick people? Help them. Are there people being oppressed in your community? Then stick up for them. Do you know any lonely widows? Go visit them. Are their uneducated children? Teach them how to read. Are there people who get rejected because of their race? Be a friend to them.

You know it’s easy to hear a message like this and just let it deflect off our hearts. I want to close with a few stories of individuals we know who have made a difference.

**<ARROW>** This guy, Lee Saville, was a well-paid lawyer in England, who felt God calling him to work with the street children and poor families in Romania. And over time, he ended up quitting his job and selling his home and cars and working full time doing this. We met him here in Gothenburg in 2003 when he spoke at a local church.

 **<ARROW>** And some of you might remember Tom and Sharon Batley, who visited us here in Sweden a few times and who were close friends of ours from North Carolina before we moved to Sweden. They work at an orphanage and school called Good Shepherd’s Fold in Jinja, Uganda. And now, in addition to their work at the orphanage, they are also starting something they call the Investment Year. They will have 7 or 9 young adults who are orphans and who have graduated from the school living with them for 1 year, an investment year, so that they can transition from the orphanage into the real world. The program combines discipleship, internships and biblical life skills training to prepare the young adult for the next stage of life outside of the orphanage setting. The idea is that after this year they may go on to vocational school, university, jobs or develop a business for themselves.

God can make a difference thru your life. It may not mean going to Romania or Uganda or somewhere else, but it means telling God that you want to be used by Him. Tom and Sharon had very comfortable lives like us and they gave that up to serve the orphans. We can’t all be missionaries to a foreign land, but we can help and serve the poor and the marginalized people we see around us.

Let’s pray in a moment and ask God to show us where we can serve both as individuals and as a Church community.

Now, to close, Amos gave a tough message of judgment from God to both the nations around Israel and to the Israelites themselves for their treatment of the poor. And the judgment would be carried out about 30 years later when the Assyrians overran the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C.

But God always provides a message of hope as well and Amos ends with these words. **<ARROW>**

“In that day I will restore David’s fallen shelter. I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins, and will rebuild it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,” declares the Lord, who will do these things.

This was a promise for the future that James, Jesus’ brother, quoted at the Council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 and he said they were seeing its fulfillment in that the Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus at that time.

Pray.

Now let me close this service with this prayer of Paul’s in his letter to the Ephesians.

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*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen*

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines. **Amos 2:6-8**

12Then Amaziah said to Amos, “Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. 13 Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.”

14Amos answered Amaziah,“I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. 15 But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ 16 Now then, hear the word of the Lord. You say,“‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the descendants of Isaac.’

17 “Therefore this is what the Lord says:

“‘Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country.

And Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.’”

**Amos 7:12-17**