

Living Faith Lutheran Church, November 8, 2020 – Text Amos 5: 18-24

I've always had an affection for the prophet Amos, even though he doesn't come across as all warm and fuzzy. You get the sense that if you said to Amos, "Good Morning" he'd probably reply "What's so good about it?"

I have an affection for him because he was a farmer, a herder of sheep, a dresser of sycamore trees. He was probably an owner, not a servant, as he was educated and had no problem travelling from Judah to the northern Kingdom of Israel. Above all, he was a faithful prophet, a truth-teller – when the words he spoke were dismissed and vilified.

We're visiting the 8th Century BC, about mid-century. The Kingdom established under David had already been wracked by division and was divided into the Kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The northern kingdom, Israel, was enjoying the blessings of peace, prosperity and expansion under King Jeroboam. God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

But not quite!

- The economic expansion allowed the moneyed class to give loans to the poor landholders and, when they could not pay, expropriated their land.
- In Samaria, the capital, the wealthy enjoyed the urban lifestyle of opulence and leisure.
- There was a laxity in devotion to God's Covenant and Law. Suppressed religious practices emerged based on sorcery and superstition.

So Amos arrives in town and wastes no time in condemning the inequality, immorality and naïve pride of the wealthy and their priests.

By this time in Israel, the concept of 'The Day of the Lord' had emerged. Not simply Sabbath practice, but moments when God's blessing flowed and God's light shone upon the people. It would take a separate sermon to trace the evolution of this term. There was the optimistic version which Amos confronted:

After all – were they not God's chosen? Did they not inherit the promises of God? Did not God promise an everlasting Covenant of love and protection? So, check your calendars, I think another Day of the Lord is just around the corner.

You will find darker interpretations in other places, especially Isaiah 2. But in literal terms it followed the trajectory of a Hebrew day: beginning at dusk and then opening to morning light. A time of darkness – judgment, followed by a new day of blessing for the saints.

Today, we hear Amos' interpretation – describing to the blessed what The Day of the Lord was really going to look like.

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!

Why do you want the day of the Lord?

It is darkness, not light;

as if someone fled from a lion,

and was met by a bear;

or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,

and was bitten by a snake.

Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light,

and gloom with no brightness in it?

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.

And then the clincher – what every social justice type loves to hear:

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The Canadian historian and author, Margaret MacMillan, has written extensively on the causes and repercussions of WW1 – the latter entitled Paris 1919. But the one that fascinated me was ‘The War That Ended Peace’, describing the society of Europe from about 1895 to 1914: the Paris World Fair, the Eiffel Tower, the Colonial Expansion and the Scramble for Africa. There was money for symphonies and concerts, to buy art works, trains to travel the continent, discovery of fashion and foods. It was indeed La Belle Époque.

The summer of 1914 found the political masters of Europe on vacation. The foreign minister of Russia had gout, the British and German ministers were christening ships and opening railroads. The French were all vacationing on the Riviera. Then there was an assassination in an out-of-the-way place called Sarajevo.

What had this to do with Canada, trying to survive in our northern climes? Well, we responded to the King’s call and 61,000 Canadians died and 172,000 wounded in Europe – the largest per capita casualty rate of all combatants.

Surely the Day of the Lord must have been in Paris or Berlin or London? It could not be at Vimy Ridge or Passchendaele.

Later, in 1919, the American, Russian and French leaders would journey to London where, with pomp and splendour, mixed with vindictiveness, they would fashion a new wondrous decade which would birth fascism and the seeds of WW2.

I do not say this in an unkindly manner, but from our northern perch, have we seen a Day of the Lord in America? The nation of God’s providence, of manifest destiny, the beacon of liberty and prosperity and the worship of God has had a harsh lesson in humility.

We too face similar challenges in our social and political fabric. Every time we want to flaunt our goodness at the UN, someone reminds us of Indigenous Peoples and CO2 per capita.

There is always a tendency, in our lives, families, nations to see the Blessings of the Lord in terms of Prosperity, Happiness and Peace. We like it on the mountain top and, by the way, thank you God.

But the Day of the Lord holds also the theme of God's judgment; when we have forgotten the Lord, and appropriated for ourselves the mantel of all that is good.

- The times when we invoke God's name, when necessary, to thank the deity for making us so wonderful.

It would seem the 'Day of the Lord' is about more than 24 hours.

Amos was chased out of town and his words ignored until around 722 BC when the Assyrians defeated Israel. They were cruel warriors who carried some people away to other subject nations, and brought in captives from other lands to Israel. The result was the "mixed-blood" of the Samaritans and Galileans which created second class peoples until the time of Jesus.

If only the culpable and guilty were chastised in the Day of the Lord we might not mind. But all of us suffer – and often the poor and oppressed the most.

Amos, on this Day of the Lord, said this is what you must hear:

***But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.***

These are the two words God uses to describe his own desire for us:

Personal righteousness

Public justice

The two are part of God's desire; they are part of realizing within our lands and world, the true realization of the blessings of "The Day of the Lord."

Today, we honour those who have served, suffered wounds of mind and body, given their lives for our liberty and safety. "Lest We Forget". We remember their loved ones who mourned and share the inner wounds of those who witness the unimaginable.

We also mourn those in the hundreds of millions, alive in this world today, who are migrants, refugees, victims of war, poverty, disease, cruelty that we can barely fathom. They too cry aloud for the justice of God.

We are not here to judge for the finger we point at others tends to curl around back to us.

But we are the Church of Jesus Christ, the one who said that those who follow him must take up his Cross.

We are not to be judges, or pompous snobs, but disciples – receiving the grace to be righteous; praying for the courage to bear justice.

I once met a former minister who had left the pulpit to become a street worker. He said he seldom went to Church anymore. When I asked why, he said, “I often felt the prayer of thanksgiving should have been the prayer of confession.”

The Day of the Lord, says Scripture, will come like a thief in the night, at a moment least expected. A day of judgment and a day of salvation. The Church needs to be alert to the signs of the times. People have lost their way; our material wealth has led to spiritual poverty; our gods are of our own design; the rich get richer and poor get poorer.

We have a calling – and it is the weight of the prophet’s yoke.

In a few weeks we will hear from another prophet who cries Repent. A yearly remembrance of a call to be renewed, to be the people of our God, the servants of the God who demands righteousness and justice in all the world.

By the grace of Jesus, may it be so!