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Covenant Presbyterian Church
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The Common Good

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Scripture

This is what the Lord showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in their 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 spare them no longer; 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."

Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

And Amaziah said to Amos, "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." Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet nor a prophet's son, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

"Now therefore hear the word of the Lord. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac." Therefore thus says the Lord: Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land."

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

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The Common Good

The prophet Amos preached in the 8th century BCE, and to understand his preaching, particularly its relevance for today, it helps to have an understanding of the context in which he was preaching. So we're going to begin with a brief history lesson, but before you tune out, I

promise it is short and it is worth it and Emily is going to help me with some visuals just to make it more exciting.

The first thing you need to know about Israel in the 8th century BCE is that the land was divided. After the death of King Solomon, ten of the tribes of Israel formed the Northern Kingdom, which retained the name Israel, while two tribes remained in Jerusalem and formed the Southern Kingdom, taking the name Judah.

Because Jerusalem was no longer part of the Northern Kingdom, the kings of Israel needed to both establish a new capital and provide a place for people to worship now that they did not have easy access to the temple in Jerusalem. They established the capital in Samaria, and two religious centers. One at Dan in the north, and the other at Bethel in the south.

The other thing you need to know is that both Israel and Judah are enjoying a rare moment of peace and prosperity in 8th century BCE. The city of Damascus, Israel's chief economic and political rival has been captured by Assyria, creating a period of peace and granting Israel and Judah access to new lands and better trade routes, which resulted in an increase both in capital as well as in luxury goods. At the time of Amos, the city of Samaria has become a vibrant urban center filled with new construction and palatial houses. Meanwhile, the king of Israel, Jeroboam II, was expanding Israel's boundaries and amassing great tracts of land for farming. The general consensus in Israel was that this economic and political prosperity was because of God's favor.

Amos was a herdsman who lived in Tekoa, a tiny mountain village south of Jerusalem in the Judean highlands. A poor peasant, Amos was nevertheless called by God to leave his home and travel north to the religious center of Bethel in the kingdom of Israel to preach and prophesy to the elites, which is where we find him in our reading for this morning. *[Thank you Emily!]*

At first, when Amos showed up at the temple of Bethel, things went fine. Amos began his preaching by issuing God's judgment against Israel's neighbors, effectively establishing common ground by denouncing a common enemy. But it doesn't take long for Amos's preaching to begin to focus on Israel: "Thus says the Lord," reports Amos in chapter two, "For three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth." And it goes downhill from there: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan," Amos cries out in chapter 4, "you who oppress the poor, who crush the needy." Amos is not gentle and he does not mince words. The country may be prospering, but Amos was adamant that this prosperity and success was not a mark of God's favor, but instead an affront to God's justice because it came at the expense of the poor. "Woe to you who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on couches...who drink wine by the bowlful and anoint yourselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph," Amos warns.

The economy under Jeroboam II looked strong on the surface, but Amos's preaching exposed

its seedy underside: merchants were using dishonest weights and scales, wealthy landowners, including the monarchy, were expanding their estates by absorbing small farms through illegal maneuverings, and regular folks were being sold into slavery over debts as minor as the cost of sandals. Moreover, proclaims Amos, "they hate the one who reproves; they abhor the one who speaks the truth ... because they trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain." The wealthy were enjoying lavish lifestyles by manipulating the systems of the day, and they were so uncomfortable with Amos's preaching that the head priest at Bethel writes to the king insinuating that Amos's preaching is an act of treason. And Amos is sent packing because, despite its name (Bethel means house, bet, of God, El), Bethel has become not God's sanctuary but the king's.

I'm listening to a novel in which the protagonist's mother begins all her bedtime stories not with the traditional, 'once upon a time,' but instead by saying, 'it happened long ago, and it is happening still today.' We might say the same about the book of Amos.

Centuries have come and gone, but still we live in a world where the few continue to grow wealthier at the expense of the poor. We live in a country where the top 10% of the population holds 60% of the wealth while the bottom half, the bottom 50%, holds only 6%.[1] We, too, live in a country where the justice system is structured to benefit those who have wealth and privilege. We might not be selling people into slavery over the cost of sandals, but we <u>are</u> imprisoning those who came to this country to escape poverty and violence, seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

It happened long ago and it is happening still today.

So what, then, are we to do?

When we turn to Amos, it seems, at first glance, as though the problem resides with those in authority. In our passage for this morning, it is Amaziah, the head priest at Bethel, and the king himself at whom Amos directs his scathing critiques—certainly they are the ones offended by his speech. And this makes sense: we, too, look to our leaders, the ones we have invested with power, to be responsible for the common good, and we too, tend to lay the blame at their feet when the common good does not live up to its name.

But if we broaden our scope beyond this morning's passage, it becomes clear that Amos uses Amaziah and Jeroboam as stand-ins for the political and religious elite. Amos' critique is leveled at the collective, at all those with wealth, power, and privilege, however small.

It's easier, of course, to blame individuals, but as Richard Rohr writes, "there is little value in placing our attention merely on a handful of bad actors... [we do that because it gives us a sense of control]. But culture and systems are what create the large-scale evils that threaten

[1] https://www.cbo.gov/publication/60807

us—such as poverty, war, and ecological devastation. [We] must address collective evil. Nothing will ever change if we merely convert, imprison, or judge 'bad guys'... Prophets [like Amos] ... attacked hidden cultural assumptions more than they did the people caught up in them. ... [because they knew] that it is social sin that destroys civilization and humanity." Sins like the idealization of wealth, celebrity worship, the pursuit of fame and fortune, a denial of common-truth, and the criminalization of difference.[2]

But if cultural assumptions are at the root of what is wrong in our society, how do we go about fixing it? Here, too, Amos has some wisdom. Amos begins his prophecy angry, you heard some of his scathing critiques. Reading the first few chapters of Amos, you get the sense that he would have preferred not to leave his home to travel to another country and confront the wealthy and comfortable with their own sins. His angry strident tone and insulting slurs bring to mind the prophet Jonah, who also was not a fan of the job God had given him. But over the course of his prophecy, Amos mellows, and it becomes clear that his critiques and insults were meant less to shame than to wake people up, to help them see themselves, and their lives, and the decisions they were making more clearly.

Which is the first step. We must see the world around us and our roles in it clearly, which is hard. It's hard because we don't want to view our actions and our lives as complicit in systems of injustice when that isn't what we intend for them to be. And it is hard because so much of the injustice in our world is built into systems we take for granted. Systems that tend to either benefit us or not affect us and thus don't often provoke our attention or scrutiny. But there's no getting around the fact that we are complicit. Whether we want to be or not, simply by virtue of living in society, we participate in systems that are unjust. We can't help it. But we can be aware of it.

And we can work to create a different vision; we can begin to embody a better way of being in the world. "Let justice flow like water, and righteousness [integrity] like an ever-flowing stream," Amos writes. Let "the mountains run with new wine and the hills flow with it ... let cities be rebuilt, vineyards and gardens replanted" (Amos 5 & 9). Amos, raised in the highlands of Judah, paints a picture of God's world in which nature is restored, justice and integrity are ever-present.

What images would we use? If our world embodied God's justice and goodness, what would it look like? What would be different about our lives and decisions? How might we act differently? See differently?

Living a life of faith means living as though God's kingdom is at hand. It means living into God's generous and generative vision of the world even when doing is counter-intuitive in our present context. Because when we live as though God's kingdom is at hand, we model it for others, we redefine what common good looks like, we cast a different vision, and we begin to bring it

[2] Richard Rohr, "Amos: Messenger to the Collective" in The Tears of Things: Prophetic Wisdom for an Age of Outrage (New York: Convergent, 2025), 17-28.

about.

We live in a broken and fearful world. It was true long ago and it remains true today. And there is no easy fix, tempting though it can be to point fingers. But there is work we can do, work God calls us to do—to see things more clearly, to love this world more dearly, and to live into God's generous, generative vision of what could be. Amen.