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Sharing Bad News in Good Times

Amos 2:4-8; 5:14-15, 21-24; 7:10-17

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Amos 5:14-15, 21-24, “**Seek good and not evil, that you may live**; and so **the Lord, the God of hosts**, will be with you, just as you have said.

Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that **the Lord, the God of hosts**, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.”

“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.

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

Amos shared God’s message around 760-750 B.C. during the reigns of Kings Uzziah of Judah (southern kingdom) and Jeroboam II of Israel (northern kingdom). **He is the earliest of the Old Testament prophets whose words have been handed down in writing.** During Jeroboam’s reign, the northern kingdom of Israel reached its peak of territorial expansion, military security, participation in the rituals of religion, and economic prosperity and the people took this as a sign that Lord was happy with them. Into this scene came the prophet Amos, a native of the Judean village of Tekoa, not far from Bethlehem. **Amos had the very difficult job of delivering hard words in good times.**

Have you ever been in that position? When I was a Head Resident in college, I often found myself in the position of having to deliver hard words that interrupted other people’s “good” times. *“Shut the door. Turn the music down. Knock it off. You need to leave.”* Fortunately for me, my roommate was one of the strongest and toughest guys on campus, so people knew that behind me there was a force, beyond even the authority of the school, that they knew they would have to reckon with at their own peril.

Amos came to denounce Israel and all the neighboring countries, for relying on military might instead of God, for social injustice against the poor, a corrupt judicial system, immorality, and meaningless, empty religion. It is tough enough to have to share the bad news of God’s judgment on the injustice *in your own country*, but to go to *someone else’s* country and tell them that *their God* was about to destroy everything

they held dear, that is truly an intimidating task, perhaps even life-threatening task. But there was power behind Amos that compelled him and enabled him to go.

So Amos began his message by telling the citizens of Israel about God's judgment on their neighbors who they detested. God says there are more than enough reasons not to revoke the punishment coming to Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and while he is saying this you can almost hear the residents of Israel saying, "*Yeah, go get 'em God, give them what's coming to them. They deserve it.*" Then Amos says, in the scripture Pastor Mary read from Amos 2, that the Lord will punish his home land of Judah "*because they have rejected the law of the Lord, and have not kept his statutes.*" And the people may have said, "*Wow, he must truly be a prophet he not only proclaimed God's judgment on our enemies but even on his own people. Preach it, Amos!*"

Then their enthusiasm turned to anger when he announced God's judgment on *their* injustice and immorality. Amos implores the people to seek *the Holy One*, and not a so called *holy place*, Bethel. And **Amos hammers on the need for a genuine relationship with God and for justice** – justice in relationships, justice in the treatment of the poor, justice in government and the courts, he wants justice to flow like mighty waters. **Unfortunately the people and the institutions had been impediments to justice rather than instruments of justice.** As a result God's judgment is going to be so severe that the even the house of the king will not be spared. That brings us to Amos 7:10-17,

"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 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.' ”

Amos's message is a simple one: God will soon bring disaster in the form of military defeat and exile upon Israel. The sins that have led to this judgment include social injustice, such as depriving the poor of their rights, and religious arrogance.

It is a sobering and even frightening thought to consider that if God didn't spare even Israel, the people the Lord brought up out of slavery in Egypt, and led to a promised land and with whom God established a covenant, then there is no guarantee for any country including our own, that God will put up with the same kind of sins in our midst that God would not tolerate in Israel. Proverbs 21:7 says, *“The violence of the wicked will sweep them away, because they refuse to do what is just.”* I don't think any of us want to live in a country that is known for injustice, depriving the poor of their rights, or religious arrogance. I want to live in a land known for justice, generosity, compassion, and humility. Many folks who attend BBC are from the metro New York City area and so are familiar with LaGuardia Airport. Perhaps fewer of us know much about Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor of New York City during the worst day of the Great Depression and during all of World War II. Rev. James N. McCutcheon a retired pastor and author, and the father of BBC member George McCutcheon wrote me a wonderful letter after attending our 5:30 Christmas Eve service. He also wrote the following story about Mayor LaGuardia. “Devoted New Yorkers called him “the Little Flower” because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, and take entire orphanages to baseball games. Whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he used to go on the radio and read the Sunday “funnies” to the kids.

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward in the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop

the charges. *"It's bad neighborhood, you Honor,"* the man told the mayor. *"She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson."* LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, *"I've got to punish you....The law makes no exceptions – ten dollars or ten days in jail."* But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous hat, saying, *"Here's the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore, I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."*

So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old woman who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some 70 petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Like Mayor LaGaurdia, **we want to be instruments of justice, not impediments to justice.** That begins in our own individual lives, in the decisions, and choices we make. It also means being willing to confront injustice in the larger systems and institutions. Amaziah told Amos never again to prophesy at Bethel because it was the king's sanctuary and a temple of the kingdom. What Amaziah didn't understand or had chosen to accept, was that the problem was precisely that. Bethel wasn't *the sanctuary of God*, it was not *the temple of the Lord*, it was *the king's*. The supposed holy place had been corrupted by human power and human ambition and the Lord wasn't there, except now in the condemning words of the prophet Amos.

If we are not careful, it is easy to become accepting of wrongs rather than working to right them, especially, if like the priest Amaziah, we benefit. Proverbs 28:5-6 says, *"The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely. Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways even though rich."*

I like the story about the small rural farming town in the New England that could only be reached by a narrow road with a bad curve in it. There were frequent accidents on the road, especially at the curve, and the preacher would preach to the people of the town to make sure they were Good Samaritans. And so they were, as they would pick the people up on the road, for this was religious work and they felt very good about themselves for doing it. One day someone suggested that they buy an ambulance to get

the accident victims to the hospital more quickly. The preacher preached and the people gave generously, for this was religious work.

Then one day a selectman suggested that the town authorize building a wider road and taking out the dangerous curve. Now it happened that the mayor had a farm market right at the curve of the road, and he was against taking out the curve because people had to slow down right in front of his stand and so he felt the curve really helped bring in customers. Someone asked the preacher to say a word to the mayor and the congregation next Sunday about it. But the preacher and most of the people figured they had better stay out of politics; so the next Sunday the preacher preached on the Good Samaritan and encouraged the people to continue their fine work of picking up the accidents victims – which they did.”¹

Don't sell justice, your integrity or anyone else's for any price.
For 30 pieces of silver Judas didn't betray Christ, he betrayed and sold himself.

You and I can either be a rock or a dam that prevents justice from flowing, or we can be an instrument in the Lord's hand to clear the way for justice to roll like a river and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Imagine what would happen in our community and beyond if all of us began to be as concerned for justice as the Lord, and Amos? Benjamin Disraeli said, “*Justice is truth in action.*” Jesus came to proclaim and bring justice. In Matthew 12:17-20 we hear these words from the prophet Isaiah fulfilled in Jesus, “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and **he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.** He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick

until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

Jesus told us to be concerned about “the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23). These are the things Jesus wants to see in our lives.

A pastor shared the following story: “On two days during the year a certain doctor goes upstairs to the closet and takes out of it a coat that is out of style; one sleeve is patched, and it's rather tawdry and stringy and dirty. He showed it to me one day and I asked him why he wore it on certain days of the year.

¹ Bausch, World of Stories, p. 320.

He said that when he was an intern in New York City, in lower Manhattan, he got a call one very blustery, cold winter night. A little girl came banging at his door. He threw on his jacket, and he went to a stinking tenement, up very dirty stairs into a one room apartment, where a little boy lay terribly sick. His mother and father were hovering over him. He did what he could for the malnourished child, but in spite of his best efforts, the little boy died then and there in front of him.

The doctor was shivering not only from the hurt of the boy dying, but because there was no heat in the apartment. The boy's father took off his coat, the very coat the doctor was wearing and gave it to him and said, "Here, you're cold. Thank you for trying to save our boy."

The doctor knew then and there that that was the only way the couple could possibly thank him. He didn't have the heart to refuse or give it back. When he became a prominent and fairly wealthy physician, once or twice a year – on the anniversary of the boy's death, and on the day that he got his diploma to be a doctor – he wears that coat to remind himself what it's all about.

Paul Scherer, *"It has always seemed to me a sad incongruity the way we represent the figure of Justice. We put a sword in one hand, a pair of scales in the other; then we tie a bandage tightly over her eyes. Blindfolded, she cannot see where to strike; cannot read her own scales, and never knows when they balance. That, ironically enough, is the trouble, with our kind of justice.*

Neither the love nor the justice of God is blindfolded."

You and I can either be a rock or a dam that prevents justice from flowing, or we can be an instrument in the Lord's hand to clear the way for justice to roll like a river and righteousness like an ever rolling stream. Whatever we do, God's love and justice are not blindfolded, God see us and all we do.

Prayer

Psalm 33:5, God *"loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord."*

"The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." MLK Jr.

Blessing

"To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."

"Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times." Proverbs 21:3, Psalm 106:3,