

Sunday: July 11, 2010

Scripture: Amos 7:7-17
Colossians 1:1-14

Sermon: A Study in Opposites

Call to Worship: Psalm 82

God presides in the great assembly;
God gives judgment among the gods.
How long will you defend the unjust and show
partiality to the wicked?
Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless;
Maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed.
Rescue the weak and needy;
Deliver them from the hand of the wicked.
They know nothing, they understand nothing.
They walk about in darkness;
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
I said, "You are 'gods';
You are all children of the Most High.
But you will die like mere men;
You will fall like every other ruler.
Rise up, O God, judge the earth,
for all the nations are your inheritance.

Hymns:

#460 Holy God, We Praise Your Name
#409 Wild and Lone the Prophet's Voice
#392 Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord

Prayer of Confession:

Eternal God, strong to save, we confess before You our reluctance to acknowledge that we need saving. We see ourselves as decent folk who would not harm others, nor would we destroy your created order. We come to worship and we understand the demands which Faith places upon us. But deep down in the depths of our spirits there is a tendency to praise ourselves too much and to over play our own righteousness. In this, O God, we have fallen to the sin of self-righteousness and our humility becomes like a halo that scorches our foreheads. Forgive our pride, O God, and teach us the humility that we see reflected in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, your Son, our Savior. Amen.

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One of the most difficult challenges we have to make when examining our religions faith is to conceptualize it in terms of God's judgment. We, who are steeped in the religion of Grace have a difficult time understanding that God's Grace is but one side of the coin. The opposite side of that coin is JUDGMENT.

And, for the most part, we don't want to talk about JUDGMENT. This is never more clear than when we attempt to bring our Faith into dialogue with the political structure.

And in our national ethos we have misconstrued the concept of separation of Church and State to mean that Faith has nothing to say to the State and that the State shall not interfere with religion. And then we take it one step further and we attempt to cleanse all political realms so as to be "religious free". The counter point of this is that we preach a religion that is politically neuter.

Amos would roll over in his grave if he could see what we have done! Amos had no such allusions about the role of Faith in the political realm. He lived in a time when the religious practitioners had cozied up to the political leaders of the day. In other words, the King and his court had formed a close and comfortable relationship with the Priests to the point where it was impossible for the Priests to speak a word of judgment to the King.

When the King and his minions engaged in behavior that was in direct opposition to the Justice of God; when the poor were oppressed; when the strangers and the aliens were abused and marginalized; when orphans and widows were cheated out of their inheritances; when hard working farmers and craftsmen were

swindled out of their living; when those with political clout were given preference in the courts over those who had none; when justice was sold like a commodity..... The religious Leadership remained silent. No word of Judgment could be heard in the land.

Then along came Amos! Not one of your Seminary Trained Preachers. Not a member of the priesthood at Bethel, or on the Mount in Jerusalem. A simple man of faith who spent most of his life out in the wild, caring for sheep and dressing sycamore – fig trees. A man born to humble parents in the village of Tekoa, just 6 miles south of Bethlehem. That put him squarely in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. But when God called him, God called him to speak a word of Judgment to the political structure of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And it is not pretty!

Amos cried out:

This is what God says:

***Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel;
I will spare them no longer.***

The high places of Isaac will be destroyed

And the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined;

With my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.

And when the high priest of Bethel, Amaziah, hears what Amos has to say, he sends a letter off to Jeroboam, saying: Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words.

Then Amaziah turns to Amos and tells him to get on back down to the Southern Kingdom where he belongs and earn your living down there and do your prophesying down there. Because this is the sanctuary and temple of the King.

Religious faith had become so perverted in the Northern Kingdom of Israel that even the high priest understood that the King owned

the place of worship. No one would dare to confront the King because the King owned not only their buildings and worship center, but their hearts and minds as well. So, don't come up here, Amos, and speak truth. The King owns truth. Indeed, the King decides what is truth.

Well, Amos has one last thing to prophesy. Because of your hardness of heart and your refusal to acknowledge the truth of God's Justice the following will happen, Amaziah:

*Your wife will become a prostitute in the city
Your sons and daughters will fall by the sword
Your land will be measured and divided up
You yourself will die in a pagan country
And all Israel will certainly go into exile.
Away from their native land.....*

And that is exactly what happened. While the time frame of Amos prophesying at Bethel is between 760 to 750 (remember we are counting backwards) by the year 721, the armies of Tig-lap-pilizer have overrun the Northern Kingdom, leaving only the Southern Kingdom to struggle for another 40 years before they too are carried off into captivity.

The question we have to ask ourselves in 2010 is: "How does the religious community of today speak a prophetic word to the political structure?" Can we speak out about the injustices we see taking place and the abuses of power that we experience without losing our tax exempt status? Are we as Christians (Followers of Jesus) too enmeshed in the dogma of the prevailing political agenda, so much so that we cannot speak the word of judgment that our country... indeed, our world needs to hear.

Now the title of this sermon is "A Study In Opposites". You got one side through the eyes of Amos. A nation so consumed with

corruption that the only answer is for the judgment of God to descend upon the nation and cleanse it.

For the opposite side we turn to Paul's Letter to the Church in Colosse. Now, I don't want to portray things at Colosse as being perfect. Certainly the church of Christ is beset with problems. But we deduce from Paul's letter that the folks at Colosse were struggling to not only strengthen their faith, but to develop acts of love and grace that were worthy of that Faith.

We always thank God ... because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus..

And of the love you have for all the saints; the faith and love that springs from

The hope that is stored up for you in heaven.

All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been

Doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's Grace in all

Its truth.

For this reason we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you

With the knowledge of his will ...

And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may

Please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the

Knowledge of God....

If the society of Israel in Amos' day is an example of how not to honor God, the life of the early Church in Colosse is an example of how to struggle to honor God. On the one hand, the religious leaders in Amos' day had sold their spiritual lives to the political structure. In contrast, we find in Colosse a deep and committed struggle to know what God really wants of his people. In Amos's

day the social structure revolved around self-agrandizement and personal greed, at the expense of the downtrodden, the widows, orphans and aliens in their midsts. The followers of Christ in Colosse were gaining a reputation of deep love and caring for all the Saints across Asia Minor and throughout the known world. Paul has heard of their Faith and how it was manifests in their good deeds and he admonishes them to continue bearing fruit as befit those who love and honor God through Jesus Christ.

But we don't have to go back to Amos' day, or even to Paul's day to see these same contrasts all around us. Our society is a study in contrasts. Within a 24 hour period you and I can experience the highs and the lows of life. On the one hand we hear of unscrupulous business men who think it is OK to absconds with billions of other's people's retirements funds. And then the very next news report we hear is about a youth group that has organized a marathon to raise funds to help a young child with cancer.

You and I can turn on our TV's and see films that are filled with hate and destruction, foul words and pure barbarian havoc. And then we can change channels and find wonderful programs about nature and positive family life and community caring.

And we can tune our radios to a station that plays songs that uplift one minute and then tear us down the next. We live in a world of contrasts. And the goal of a follower of Christ is to live in the realm of God's Grace and at times to speak a word of Judgment to those elements of life that degrade God's Grace. Even if it means that we must speak out in opposition to the political structure of the day. True patriotism is not following blindly the political cadence of the moment. True patriotism is speaking truth to bigotry and hatred that some would pass off as political rhetoric.

God calls us to struggle like the followers of Christ in Colosse and from time to time, speak out like Amos did at the temple in Bethel. God give us the Grace to live within that struggle.

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