

Sermon

Living Out our Identity

Pastor Lisa Giacomazza

Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Amos, (flourished 8th century bc), **the first Hebrew prophet to have a biblical book named for him.** He accurately foretold the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel (although he did not specify Assyria as the cause) and, as a prophet of doom, anticipated later Old Testament prophets. Amos wrote at a time of relative peace and prosperity but also of neglect of God's laws. He spoke against an increased disparity between the very wealthy and the very poor. His major themes of **justice, God's omnipotence, and divine judgment** became staples of prophecy. What was the prophet Amos basic message? what warning did he issue? **-The worship of God must show itself in concrete deeds of mercy and justice to the weak and the poor.***

Today's scripture is the third vision in a series of four. The first two were extreme...one was a vision of locusts coming to destroy all the vegetation...sort of. First the King gets his portion through the tax law and then the locusts destroy what's left. So Amos pleads with God and the way he persuades God is by emphasizing that we, God's creation, are small. Knowing God is a God of the meek – and God complies.

Amos's next vision is one of Fire – same as the first. Destruction and again, Amos pleads and God complies. So in today's scripture, Amos sees a wall with a plumb line. Have you ever used a plumb line before? Many

Inspired by commentary published on workingpreacher.com commentary on Amos 7:7-17 by Pamela Scalise and on Luke 10:25-37 by Jeannine K. Brown.

*excerpt from faithlifensermons.com "who is Amos?"

years ago, my mother in law helped me hang wallpaper. She was quite the expert and I had never done it before and she brought her own, hand made plumb line. It was merely a piece of heavy string with a small metal weight – it was actually a fishing weight – on the end. Then she put chalk on the line, allowed it dangle until it was still then snapped it and created a perfect plumb line that was even or level with the that specific wall. You couldn't simply use a ruler or measuring device because it doesn't account for any variance in the settling of that particular wall and your wall paper would end up hanging crooked. So what a plumb line does is it creates an understanding of the wall.

In this vision, what is clear is politics are the rule of the day. We have seen throughout our lectionary over the last several weeks, kings have continued to create problems and power struggles throughout Israel's kingdoms. They have struggled with God because they want to continue to be revered and worshipped by the people – they don't particularly like the competition from God. Amaziah of our scripture treats Amos's prophecy as political agitation, conspiring against Jeroboam the King. Earlier Israelite dynasties had been overthrown by the words of prophets, so his concern is understandable. He orders Amos to cease prophesying at the royal sanctuary and then Amos, answers by denying being a prophet but that he was sent by God. If you dig deeper into the book of Amos it will make your head hurt given all the different power struggles of the various kingdoms of Israel and how they disobey YHWY throughout. And what is clear is when religion and politics mix, it causes a tremendous amount of confusion. One is forced to consider whether they can impose what is expected verses

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what seeks justice and mercy. The plumb line was God's warning of what was happening the wall that was protecting Israel. A measurement that would change based on the strength of that wall.

Our Gospel from Luke – The Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known stories of Jesus. We have “Good Samaritan laws”, legal protections for those who act as good Samaritans to help others. Jesus is tested by a Torah expert about actions consistent with inheriting eternal life. Jesus responds with a question – “What is written in the law?” and the man answers correctly – love God and love neighbor. But then the man asks this question...who is my neighbor?

Is that a question you ask yourself when we talk about mission work or how we might help our community and beyond? In the back of your mind...do you wonder? Do they deserve this help? What about...God helps those who help themselves...where does this come in? Should I pity those who have less? What about hard work? Doesn't that matter? And Jesus answers by sharing the parable we read today. Jesus takes time to describe in detail the acts that are provided to the dying man – he attended to his wounds, he brought him to the Inn and he paid for his care. Jesus outlines the “good guys” or who seemingly should've been the good guys who passed him by and stresses the most unlikely person due to prior prejudices that were part of the culture (Gentile to Jew) is the one who provides help – exemplary help. Help that went beyond what anyone may have expected in this situation. And what is most interesting about this story, about this truth, is Jesus does not say that the Samaritan is on outcast or doesn't belong or that they were enemies. In this act, in this

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moment of neighbor taking care of neighbor – of crossing the street and erasing the lines that divide these two men, Jesus, in contrast to the struggles Israel had from the time of the Kings to this moment, Jesus is showing us that God does not see us as separate that need to come together – God created us as one nation. That when we cross the street or when we accept help from someone who appears different, or seems different or acts differently to us or we've been separated by our cultures – in that moment we are living out our identity...of who we truly are as a people.

Can you see how we get persuaded by politics, by government, by rules, by a funny meme that exploits someone...I saw one the other day and it was obviously an Hispanic man in a stereotypical colorful printed shirt, unbuttoned down to his belly button and it said, "What cologne is he wearing?" And people chime in...and it seems funny, innocent enough but it's degrading to that culture and every time someone innocently shares it, the width of the street between us widens.

God wants restoration...this parable offers an insistent call to us, the people of God to emulate this compassionate Samaritan as a way of living out our identity as God's people in the world. Let us always be mindful of it.

Amen