

November 12, 2023  
Amos 5:18-24

Pentecost 24  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Empty Gestures”

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

Worship was a central part of life at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. Not only was the chapel building at the center of the campus, but it was the place where the entire seminary community would gather for worship on an almost daily basis. A wide variety of liturgies were offered during the week: in addition to Tuesday morning Holy Communion, there would be services of Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline. The chapel was also the place where students could practice what we were learning in both liturgy and preaching classes; the chapel functioned as a laboratory for experimenting with different styles of worship and for finding worship leadership practices that would serve each of us after we graduated and were ordained as parish pastors. Several of us also served as sacristans (the fancy seminary word for altar guild), which gave us hands-on experience in worship preparation that I still use today. Chapel worship was a special time of the day that reminded us that as important as our academic studies were, the purpose of our years at the seminary was to prepare us for leading our future congregations in worshipping and praising our Lord.

While I have many fond memories of worship in the seminary chapel, I also remember that it was a place where our competitiveness as students was on display. Seminarians, in my experience, can be a very competitive and judgmental group of people; we would often find ourselves competing on who would lead worship the best, or whose altar was set according to what we had learned in class, or who knew how to comport themselves in worship (even to the point of how one folded their hands when leading worship). If it was not our turn to lead worship, we would often find ourselves in the congregation judging our classmates in the way they were leading worship, reviews that would continue over lunch or in the dormitory. We wanted to show our classmates and professors that we were well-trained for our future role as pastors, and each of us strived to be the best in the performance of leading the seminary congregation in the liturgy of the day.

One semester, a visiting professor came to campus to teach courses in liturgy while one of the faculty members was on sabbatical. Dr. Henry Horn was the long-time

pastor of University Lutheran Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which served the academic communities of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (he was also my roommate's uncle). Dr. Horn was one of the leading experts in Lutheran liturgy, and everyone was excited to have him sharing his knowledge with the student body. During his first week on campus, Dr. Horn attended every service in the chapel, sitting in the back and quietly observing what was happening in the chancel and the congregation. When we gathered for his first class, we expected him to offer his perspective on our campus worship life, including how well the student body was doing in leading the congregation in the various weekly liturgies. But when Dr. Horn began to speak, the entire room fell into a shocked silence: "What I witnessed in worship last week was appalling! All I saw was a group of people who were so focused on themselves and their performance that they seemed to completely ignore the fact that worship is about praising God, not gaining praise for oneself. The behavior of the people in the congregation was worse; instead of gathering to hear God's Word and be inspired to serve as God's people, all I heard was criticism and sarcasm. No one should be proud of what is happening in worship in this seminary community; frankly, all that you are doing is nothing more than a bunch of empty gestures!"

We were stunned – but we also knew that Dr. Horn was correct. We were so focused on the mechanics and performance of worship that we had forgotten that worship is not about how well we do in the production of a service, but if the worship gathering is focused on praising God and seeking to hear the Word of God being proclaimed to us. Dr. Horn's harsh critique was in the spirit of the prophet Amos, who instead of praising the worship of the people of Israel proclaimed the critique of the Lord who declared that "*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*" (Amos 5:21).

The book of Amos is one of the Twelve Prophets of the Old Testament whose works are not as large as the major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel) but whose message is as important. The prophet is known only from the book in which his sayings were collected and preserved. According to the book's opening verse, Amos was "*among the shepherds of Tekoa*" (1:1), a town in the hill country of Judah, about ten miles south of Jerusalem. Amos was a contemporary of Hosea, prophesying to the northern kingdom of Israel in the Eighth Century BC. This was a time of the divided kingdom, in which the northern ten tribes organized themselves into a kingdom that took the name Israel, which the two southern tribes formed the kingdom of Judah. While both kingdoms considered themselves to be the children of Israel, Amos would have been considered a foreigner since he came north to proclaim God's message to the people of the "other" kingdom. Like Hosea, Amos'

message to the northern kingdom was harsh: speaking in the name of the Lord, Amos proclaimed that *“the end has come upon my people Israel”* (8:2). While his career was brief (perhaps lasting only six months) his message proved to be so disturbing that Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, begged Amos to *“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 the temple of the kingdom.”* (7:12-13).

An example of how harsh Amos’ words could be and why they were so disturbing to the people who first heard them can be seen in today’s first lesson, which begins with language that was usually reserved for a funeral: *“Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD!”* (5:18). “Alas” (“Woe”) was typically an exclamation of a grieving person, a traditional part of a funeral liturgy. The “woe-cry” was used as a wail of grief over the dead (*“He laid the body in his own grave; and they mourned over him, saying, ‘Alas, my brother!’”* – 1 Kings 13:30). The “woe-cry” pronounced over a living audience is found only in prophetic sayings; the prophet, knowing in advance the punishment decreed by the Lord, would lament the death of his audience who did not realize the fate that awaited them. The prophet laments over the complacency of those who assume that only good can come to them since they are the people of the Lord God of Israel. The people are assuming that the “day of the LORD” (*yom YHWH*) will be a time when the Lord will appear to bless his people, when God will once again defeat Israel’s enemies in battle. For Amos, however, the “day of the LORD” will be a day of judgment, a day of darkness instead of light:

- “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?” – 5:18b-20.

Amos attacks the hope of those who already anticipate the coming of the day of the LORD as a day of the Lord’s victory over cosmic and historical adversaries and the renewal of prosperity for the nation. For Amos, however, the people are invoking their own doom: *“[The people] understand the theology of the Day of Yahweh; what they do not understand is Yahweh and themselves.”* (James Luther Mays). Amos uses two metaphors that portray a situation in which a man escapes one danger to his life only to fall into another from which he cannot escape, the fate in which Israel finds itself when *“the salvation they desire is in fact their death, for they are enemies of Yahweh.”* (Mays).

- “Amos deplores the fact that his people seem to be rejoicing in the prospect of the Day of the LORD. This will be a day of darkness and destruction, not

just for Israel's enemies but for Israel itself. God will hold Israel accountable for sin along with the foreign nations." – Carolyn J. Sharp.

While Amos' audience may have adjusted to the harshness of his proclamation, nothing could have prepared him for the words he pronounces upon their worship life, a source of great pride for the people. By all accounts, the shrines at Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba were spectacular; no expense was spared in their construction, and their liturgies were presided over by the finest of worship leaders who were exact in their preparation and performance. The people assumed that God would be pleased with their worship, and that the nation's prosperity was God's reward to them for their extravagant faithfulness. But Amos proclaims that far from being pleased with their worship, what God has witnessed has resulted in the exact opposite:

- "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." – 5:21-23.

"Hate" expresses the total resources of a person set against someone or something (*"You must not do the same for the LORD your God, because every abhorrent thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods."* – Deuteronomy 12:31). Amos makes clear that the Lord does not merely disapprove of the people's worship; the shock of his message is that God hates what is happening in their worship services. Amos has proclaimed previously that frequented these sanctuaries is equivalent to rebellion against God and ridicules the offering of sacrifices in these shrines; he has also claimed that God is not to be found at Bethel, Gilgal, or Beersheba:

- "Come to Bethel – and transgress; to Gilgal – and multiply transgressions; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; bring a thank-offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill-offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel, says the Lord God." – 4:4-5.
- "For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing." – 5:4-5.

So strongly has the Lord rejected the worship of Israel that Hosea went so far as to rename Bethel ("house of God") as Beth-aven ("house of evil," Hosea 5:8). The three elements of Israel's worship – festivals, sacrifice, and praise – are totally rejected by the Lord, who expresses total disdain for the way in which the people of

Israel have been worshipping: *“God wants no part of their holy days, of their offerings, or even of their hymns of praise. God wants justice and righteousness.”* (Donald E. Gowan). It must be noted that this is not a reject of the way the people are preparing or conducting their worship services; he proclaims the Lord’s rejection because what is happening in their shrines are nothing more than “empty gestures,” people who are going through the motions of worship while completely ignoring the teachings and commands of the Lord.

- “Amos does not intend to replace ritual with social action. Rather, what goes on in society must correspond to what I said and did in worship. Amos tells us that God does not accept the worship of those who show no interest in worship in their daily lives.” – Gowan.

What the Lord does desire from his people is clear: *“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”* (5:24). Once again, Amos’ vigorous use of imagery appears. Many of the wadis in Israel are dry most of the year, and when it rains, they are subject to flash flooding. The wadis are not metaphors for justice in the gate, for justice should be like the constant streams whose life-giving water can be depended on every day of the year. Justice and righteousness are God’s unconditional requirement if life is to continue. To extend Amos’ metaphor, since Israel has failed to maintain justice, it will be a torrent in which they will drown (*“... the LORD is his name, who makes destruction flash out against the strong, so that destruction comes upon the fortress.”* – 5:8b-9). Amos was inspired to recognize that the daily life of Israel had completely given up on the ethical standards of the religion that is rooted in the teachings and commands of the Lord. He clearly saw the treatment of the poor in Israel as a fundamental rejection of the relationship that the Lord had established with God’s people, which required obedience not only in worship but also in the maintenance of a just society. It is the perversion of justice that Amos has diagnosed as the major cause of Israel’s fatal disease. *“Amos’ point is this: because God’s people have not shown justice to the poor, God has no choice but to unleash God’s own justice and righteousness as punishment.”* (Sharp).

The word of the Lord that Amos proclaims continues to be disturbing to persons who find it hard reconciling how the God of steadfast love can hold hatred toward the actions of God’s own people. But the message of prophecy is meant to be shocking and disturbing; prophecy has been described as “proclaiming harsh words in a smooth season,” shaking the people out of their self-satisfied complacency so that they might repent and returning to walking in the ways of the Lord. Amos condemns the complacency of the people of Israel who assumed that their prosperity was God’s

reward for their generous faithfulness in worship, when in reality they grew rich through their exploitation of the poor. These shocking words are meant to rouse the people from their complacency so that they might repent of their actions and walk once again as children of the light, as people whose faithfulness to God in worship is extended to their faithfulness to God in their daily lives.

- “The absence of justice and righteousness is the issue. Because the requirements of appearing before Yahweh are ignored, the cult is sinful and useless, and is not the source of life. Amos revives the teaching of righteousness as the way to the life which Yahweh offers.” – Mays.

Worship remains at the heart of our lives as God’s people; our Augsburg Confession defines the church as *“the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached, and the sacraments are celebrated in accordance with the gospel.”* Luther teaches that our observance of the Third Commandment – *“remember the sabbath day and keep it holy”* – means that *“we are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.”* (*Small Catechism*). All persons involved in worship planning and leadership strive to do our very best in leading God’s people to worship and praise our Lord; but we must always be careful that we do not solely focus on the mechanics of worship to the point where our worship might be subject to Dr. Horn’s criticism of being nothing more than “empty gestures.” Worship that is faithful to God’s Will is the assembly of God’s people who gather to hear God’s Word and then depart in obedience to the command to *“Go in peace. Serve the Lord.”*

- “Sending is a time for again recalling our baptism; this time for taking our baptismal calling with us into our daily vocation. It is a time for sending and being sent; a time to thank God for the gifts of this assembly and prepare to extend them into the community. It is a time to gather up the gifts of bread and wine so that they can be sent to those who were absent that day; a time to thank God for those gifts.” – Lorraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*.

Dr. Horn returned to Cambridge after his semester in Philadelphia; but his critique of our worship life lived on long after his departure. We continued to strive to do our best in preparing and leading worship as a seminary community, but our focus was no longer on worship performance but on being faithful to our call to hear God’s Word and live in obedience to God’s teachings in our daily lives. As a congregation, we committed ourselves to no longer criticize those who were leading worship, but to support and uphold those who were leading us in our common praise of God. As

we gather as God's people, we must always take care that our worship does not descend into mere "empty gestures," but that we live, worship, and serve in faithfulness to God's call for us as the assembly of believers so that "*the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*" (Psalm 19:14).

Amen.