

The Prophets-Amos

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Sermon Topic: God provides ample signs ...

Sunday 19th August 2018

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Readings: Psalm 85, Amos 1:1-5, Amos 9:11-15, Luke 13:1-8

What a fascinating prophet we have this morning in Amos. Amos was a shepherd, a man of the fields and flocks. Probably pretty hard for most of us city-dwellers to imagine what his life was like, but it must have been pretty basic and simple. In fact, even primal. One of the greatest fears of the shepherds was lions. No guns, no loud sound or warning systems in that age. Lions hunt mainly at night and in that period of history, around 700 BC, there were lions aplenty in Israel and Judah. You may be aware that shepherds, as regularly as possible, gathered together at night and bring their flocks into the protection of thorn-bush enclosures. I've see these thorns and they are nothing to scoff at. They can be centimetres long and razor sharp. The entrance to the enclosures were obviously weaker and were protected by the shepherds lying across in front of them. If a lion was going to attack the first victims were likely to be the shepherds. My experience of lions in Africa has been that you can get within a few metres of them and not even notice they are there, they blend so well into the scenery ... and that's during the daytime! At night they are silent and invisible. Even into day's modern world, every year, shepherds continue to be taken and killed by lions. At night they are the most silent and deadly of predators. The roar of a hunting lion in the day or night sends shivers down the spine.

Amos opens his prophecy by stating that the Lord roars from Zion. This is not an idle throwaway line. Amos knows only too well what this sign means. It doesn't bode well for the target of the roar. The mighty lion, happy to sleep for long periods, has been roused. Someone is in serious trouble. For those awake to the sound it is a call to action. In Biblical terms, a prophet using the imagery of the lion roaring, was a sign that God was angry, very angry.

Amos was preaching in the northern kingdom of Israel. The various 'roars' of his prophecy build to a startling climax – one the people would not have expected. Amos begins with a series of prophecies against the surrounding nations. Against these nations, Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, and Ammon God's fury will be let loose for their continued sin and attacks on God's people. Even on Moab and Judah this judgement will be continued.

Now Amos' hearers would have been very happy to hear that God was finally taking revenge on their enemies, bringing what they considered justice for all the wrongs done against them, past and present. Who hasn't felt like that from time to time? Felt justified when we have seen others fall. Felt it was only right that they have got their come-uppance, as it were. How easy to is to sit in judgement on others and ignore our own failures. We all do it, it's part of our fallen nature. So much of that 'what goes around comes around' thinking. Amos' audience would have been, albeit briefly, rejoicing in that their time had come and their enemies would face the wrath of the Almighty God. But how brief was that delight, how quickly the smug look

wiped from their faces. It is not only the neighbouring nations that have raised God's anger. It is Israel as well.

One thing God requires of us is faithfulness. Our faithfulness to Him is seen in our faithfulness in life. All of our lives are worship: at home with our families, in the work place, on the sports field and when we gather together. We express our reverence for God not just in church but in all of our lives. We worship through the faithfulness of our relationships, through the integrity of our word and actions, in the honesty of who we are in the world. Without this our participation in corporate worship is a fraud before others, to ourselves when we look in the mirror but most of all before God. All the great and small decisions of life, but particularly the big ones, must be made in faith, without that we are nothing. Israel was going through the pretence of worship, of a faithful life, when in fact they were living a lie. God lays it out for them clearly: ***"...they sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines."*** Amos 2:6b-7. Now these sins hadn't just suddenly started. Sins of dishonesty, sins of a lack of care, sins of injustice, sexual sin, and sins of personal, commercial and corporate greed. As can happen with us if we are out of tune with God, if we are not true and honest with ourselves, sin starts to get a hold and take over our lives almost unnoticed. We can let ourselves, slowly but surely, be sucked into the devil's grip like some slowly wound fish on a line. Imperceptibly the pressure increases until we are caught well and truly, wondering where to turn and how we ever got into such a situation. Amos addresses a people whom God has watched as they have slipped deeper and deeper into the mire of sin. Amos tells us how God has sent smaller and larger warnings along the way but the people of Israel chose to ignore them. Chapter 6 tells us how much God abhors complacency and pride. Israel's folly demonstrates they wallowed in both. They had become increasingly cold hearted and unresponsive to God's Word. Now they will receive the fruits of their labours. God is angry. What has seemed secure, what has seemed a good future will turn to quicksand. If they come to their senses there is hope, if not the consequence of their sin will bury them. God is always quick to forgive and joyfully welcomes back the repentant sinner but His anger on the unrepentant is fearsome. We might note here that God is the same yesterday, today and forever. In this we have great hope. Through Jesus there is forgiveness and restoration.

This morning we have celebrated with Steve as he has made the step to commit his life to the Lord publicly. Baptism is a fresh start as we die with Jesus and are raised to new life. But as Jesus was immediately tested and tried by the devil so too we can expect difficult times as well as good ones in our journey with Jesus. Steve God blesses us with many gifts and talents and He expects us to use them to serve Him and Him through others. The devil will do his best to get you off track, to dissuade you, to challenge God's Word, to ruin your walk. Simply don't allow it. Each day commit to the Lord and keep a short account of sin, presenting it to the Lord and asking forgiveness. None of us are perfect, we all sin and fall short of the glory of

God. But in Jesus we have forgiveness and a fresh start so that guilt and remorse do not lead us astray even further. As you have committed your life to the Lord, be strong in the good times and the bad, in the times of trial and temptation and in the times of blessings and rejoicing.

Because Israel refused to listen to God they suffered horrendously as the punishments increased in intensity in order to get their attention. First the climate seemed to turn on them. The rain was withheld from them and there was a great drought and lack of food. Then plagues of locusts besieged them and this was followed by a great fire. Ultimately, Israel would be overrun. But at the end of Amos' prophecy Israel was given a great promise. A faithful remnant would and did come through. A people who would be faithful to the Lord, who would repent and respond to the Spirit of God. These would be in the line of those who would one day see God's ultimate salvation in Jesus.

Amos was a shepherd who knew what a lion roaring meant, especially when that lion was the Lord. When we look around the world, at people's behaviours, at society's direction, at the things that are happening we have to wonder what the Lord is doing right now? We can be sure He is taking a good look at us to see who His faithful ones are. Does the lion roar again today? For those who have seen and understood the ample signs there is not only hope but great joy awaiting. Those who have the courage to humble themselves, confess their sin and walk in the ways of the Lord will experience this deep joy and presence of the Lord. What life there is when we walk with the Lord with a good conscience, when we can have true honesty and openness in our relationships and can look to the future, no matter how challenging, with a true sense of an increasingly overcoming faith. Chase not after passing, temporary so-called gains but after what is lasting: character and faithfulness in Jesus. Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us the way to this great life: **“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will guide your paths.”** Simple really.

Amen