

“The Silence of God as a Punishment for Injustice”

Amos 8:1-12

July 18, 2010

Pastor Tom Williams

There are several questions which when asked will end the tenure of almost any minister. They are questions which aren't about sexuality or a woman's right to choice or other hot button social issues of the current day. These are questions which have really dropped off the radar screen of most congregations as well as most denominations. It is the question which Amos raises, no he doesn't raise it like a student in class who raises her hand and politely inquires about the meaning of life. No, Amos stands in the public square and positively rants about his concern, his response to God's call and what he rants about is economic justice. The poor are being scr... well we can't say that in church so let's just say Amos believes poor folk are getting short end of the stick! Throughout the book of Amos, we find the prophet ranting about how the rich are treating the middle class and the poor with harshness and deception.

Amos, considered to be the earliest of prophets speaking to the people of Israel at the time of King Jeroboam II sometime between 786 and 746 Before the Common Era, is like most of the Biblical witness. It is a book whose development and history is someone murky. The speeches were spoken some 200 or so years before they were put together into a scroll. About 1300 years ago, this prophet confronted the society of his day and some two hundred years after that someone put in writing what was believed to be his ideas. We are almost assured that one idea which Amos pushed throughout his ministry is the idea of economic justice as a means of celebrating God's justice in the life of the community. For Amos, justice was about how all in the community participated not how just some prospered. Faith in God's presence couldn't be simply celebrated and acknowledged in the rituals and rites but ought to be lived out. This blue collar, farmer prophet came from the southern kingdom of Judah to preach to the northern kingdom of Israel. He broke all the rules to challenge even the religious leaders of his day as he sought to develop among them a religious understanding that faith was meant not just for the holy days of obligation or worship but ought to be reflected in how one treated others. Our pericope today is fairly typical of Amos as he begins with the rhetorical question from God and Amos' answer of a vision he had.

The bowl of summer fruit is a pun, a play on words in Hebrew where the word for summer fruit is very similar to the word for “end”. Amos is comparing the end of the nation Israel to a bowl of summer fruit which is beautiful to look at but must be consumed to have its purpose truly known. It is not the appearance but the taste of the fruit. Perhaps it is the “end” or goal of a society like the one in which Amos found himself, the full response to God's presence, God's call was to be consumed by that call. That is to find oneself changed by it. Amos's complaint is that the people follow all the religious rituals of the day – they go to worship, they say the right rituals, they fulfill the duties of the holy days of obligation but they are consumed with their obsession with wealth, with money. The restlessness among the people is not caused by their concern at following God's call but with rushing to end the rituals and move back to the marketplace to practice an economics of exploitation and plunder. Thus, the pun is intended to play on the idea that the end of the nation's relationship with God has happened when like a bowl of summer fruit the concern was only with appearance and not with content!

Amos prophecy is not prophecy as we sometimes define it that is as a prediction of the future or that a prophet is a seer who “sees” the future. Amos like the other prophets of the Biblical witness is a prophet in the sense of one who explains how the people are failing to fulfill what the prophet believes to be the call of God and what they might expect as a result. In some ways, Biblical prophecy is similar to a medical professional who tells a patient that if they don’t lose weight, control their diet then certain health conditions will develop. This prophecy doesn’t promise future actions, it predicts them but also holds out the promise that change in behavior can preclude such from happening. Prophecy for Amos and the other Biblical prophets offered a view of what God would do if the people continue to ignore God’s call.

Today, we live in a society which needs to make a number of transitions and which is struggling mightily with them. As we move ahead, the church ought to be a voice of justice and one which seeks to see not just the bottom line for institutions but for individuals. How does this transition from fossil fuels to renewable effect those who have built careers and families based upon them and how do we assure that they participate in the new, more just order? How can we as an institution be more pro-active in leading this transition and what can we do to enable our members to make this transition? These are some of the questions we need ask and we need look for answers which reflect God’s call to do justice and to build a society of justice for all. We, as representatives of the religious community, need dare offer the values of justice and of God’s continuing call to us as we seek to converse regarding the answers.

Unfortunately because of some of the rhetoric and attitudes of part, the religious community is often ignored by the media and others as a place where the conversation regarding justice might best originate. It has been, though, the place where issues of justice have either originated or been fleshed out. Whether it be the civil rights movement in this country or the struggle against apartheid or genocide in others, people of faith have sought to engage in a conversation with the larger society and each other regarding these issues. Now I can’t tell you that such conversations have always been successful nor have people of faith always been on the “right” side of such issues but they have participated out of faith in such. These conversations haven’t been easy and they have created tension within churches as well as with societies and churches.

Today, we also are part of a congregation whose conversation will intensify as we seek to discover what it is God’s call is to us. As we do so, let us not lose sight of the need to make whatever changes we choose or continue on paths we trod with a commitment to that a vision of justice. And let us remember that justice is a many sided idea which causes all of us to confront our own shortcomings, our own failures and challenges us to change as we build communities where all have the opportunity to participate and which are sustainable.

Amos lived in a society where some sought only to maintain a façade of faith as they practiced a religion of holy days and Sabbath worship without concern for their daily acts of injustice and evil. Responding to God’s call, Amos sought to remind the people that God’s presence required not simply ritual but life-style, not only holy days but week days filled with practices that celebrated that presence. May we build a community whose conversation seeks justice for all as we seek to build a society of hope, joy, peace, and justice. AMEN.