

Reclaiming our
FAITH
hearing God through
the prophets

Strange Worship

A SERMON ON AMOS 5:21-24

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Sunday September 20, 2027

Reclaiming Our Faith: Strange Worship | Amos 5:21-24 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Reclaiming Our Faith is our fall sermon series, as we listen to the prophets, with hope that their words from hundreds of years ago help us to live faithfully today.

Amos is one of the 12 so-called minor prophets, and he was active in mid-8th century BCE, almost 2800 years ago, and like many other prophets, he spoke God's words of concern about excessive greed and indifference of wealthy and powerful people. Elsewhere in Amos we read strong words on this theme:

[The people of Judah] sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way... (Amos 2:6-7)

Listen to this, you who walk all over the weak, you who treat poor people as less than nothing, Who say, "When's my next paycheck coming so I can go out and live it up? How long till the weekend when I can go out and have a good time?" Who give little and take much, and never do an honest day's work. You exploit the poor, using them— and then, when they're used up, you discard them. (Amos 8:4-6 MSG)

"Truly, because you crush the weak, and because you tax their grain, you have built houses of carved stone, but you won't live in them... I know how many are your crimes, and how numerous are your sins—afflicting the righteous, taking money on the side, turning away the poor who seek help." Amos 5:11-12 CEB

Our main reading for today is bluntly addressed to people who gathered for worship, but then lived with callous indifference to the reality of poor people around them.



Today's reading bluntly speaks against worship, since it is apparently having no impact on how people live.

Amos shares God's disdain for the festivals, the offerings, the songs—virtually all parts of the worship gatherings.

“I take no delight in your solemn assemblies” is literally “I don't like the smell of your solemn assemblies” so you'll see in the passage God doesn't like the smell, the sight, or the sound of the worship service.

What God really wants is changed lives. The reading concludes with words made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Listen for God's word.

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²²Even 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.
²³Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
²⁴But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Nobody likes a hypocrite.

- The one who promises to be faithful to their spouse and then cheats
- The one who criticizes bad driving, or too much drinking, or being a cheapskate and then does all the same and worse
- The one who goes to worship regularly and knows they are called to love neighbors, to be generous, to care for hurting people, and to work for justice in the world—and they are greedy, selfish, indifferent, apathetic about poverty and suffering in the world

The Torah, the ancient Jewish law, which was known in the time of Amos, made caring for people, especially poor and outcast people abundantly clear. Widows, orphans, and foreigners are mentioned repeatedly.

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. (Exodus 22:21-22)

The law often gets very specific about justice, mandating that workers—including the immigrant workers!—should be paid immediately so they can feed their families.

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset.... Deuteronomy 24:14-15

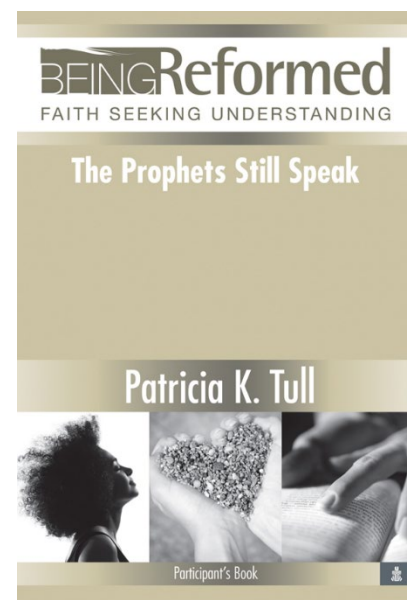
And God's people are repeatedly reminded to love and care for their neighbors, for anyone. "Do not stand idly" is a warning about indifference and apathy.

You shall not stand idly by when the blood of your neighbor is at stake: I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:16

Amos and other prophets called out the hypocrisy of religious people who gathered for worship but failed to heed basic teachings of the tradition.

We have dozens of people in small groups during this series, and in our study guide called "The Prophets Still Speak," author Patricia Tull writes:

The early prophets "are known for insisting that religious sensibilities and ethical behavior are inseparable. For them sacrifice and prayer alone cannot signify devotion to God. To worship God is to live a life of social justice and mercy, upholding weaker neighbors and sustaining the whole community."



We hear the same message of being consistent, of not being hypocritical, through the Bible. The letter of James makes that clear:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? ... If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Our worship on one day should impact what we do the other six days.

Here at Covenant, we do our best to connect learning and living. We strive to learn about God’s love for us and God’s love for the world, then we try to make that love more real in the world, with our words and our deeds.

If you came to church and heard the commandment to love your neighbor, and then you went out and acted like a jerk, that’s a disconnect.

Sadly, sometimes this happens.

There is an impression out there that the Sunday church brunch crowd, the well-dressed people who go out to eat after worship are rude to waitstaff and notorious for poor tipping.

This disconnect between faith and action, between worship and the world, being learning and living has sadly continued to be with God’s people in varying ways over the years, and at the root of that disconnect is **idolatry**.

Remember the first two commandments of the Ten? (Exodus 20:2-4)

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol....

Idolatry is worshipping a false god, turning away from God and giving ultimate loyalty to something else.

My definition for idolatry is worshipping the wrong things in the wrong way. Or you could say that idolatry is about getting our priorities wrong.

For us this means that our top priority should not be our job, our wealth, our home, our 401k, our favorite sports team. It's not our favorite politician, or our favorite political party, and it's not our country.

All of those things are important, but as Christians our top priority is meant to be God.

We are going through this series because we live in a time we collectively have gotten our priorities wrong, we've gotten distracted by false gods. Too much of the American church has fallen into idolatry, worshipping the wrong things, forgetting who we are.

That false worship is Christian Nationalism, which we've begun to talk about here.

The group Christians Against Christian Nationalism has a helpful definition.

The logo consists of a dark red square. Inside, the words "CHRISTIANS" and "NATIONALISM" are in white, bold, sans-serif font. Between them, the word "AGAINST" is in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. To the right of "AGAINST" is a small white icon of a flag with three horizontal stripes.

Christian nationalism is "a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy."

—Christians Against Christian Nationalism

There are several really helpful books available on this topic.

A horizontal banner with a yellow background. On the left, the text "Reclaiming our" is in a small, dark font, followed by "FAITH" in a large, bold, orange font. To the right of "FAITH" is the text "hearing God through the prophets" in a small, dark font.

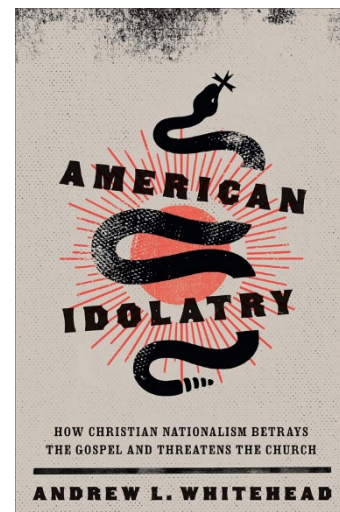
In *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*, sociologist and theologian Andrew Whitehead writes:

"Christian Nationalism leads us to practice various forms of idolatry, revering a god or gods other than Jesus, trusting in them for protection and provision."

He describes the primary idols as power, fear, and violence. And his focus as a Christian is clear

"I've come to believe that in order to faithfully follow the teachings and example of Jesus of Nazareth, I must work to disentangle Christianity from Christian nationalism. The two cannot coexist. I must serve one or the other." (p. xii)

The Hebrew phrase for idolatry is "avodah zarah" which literally means "strange worship."



I borrowed the title of this sermon from a book called *Strange Worship: Six Steps for Challenging Christian Nationalism*, by a theologian named Drew Strait. He writes:

Idols, including political power, are a competing loyalty that can make certain demands of affection and loyalty on human subjects. Learning how to negotiate these demands in responsible ways is the task of every Christian generation as we publicly express our loyalty to God in ever-changing political contexts. (P. 65)



Many scholars and theologians make the connect between idolatry (aka strange worship) and Christian Nationalism, like Angela Denker did last week.

So, what does this “strange worship” look like concretely?

If a politician of any political party advocates for posting the Ten Commandments in schools, or wants to have Christian prayer at government functions, or sells Bible after signing them with his own name, and then advocates for policies that take away food from hungry people, or dehumanize certain groups of people, or try to repeal the 19th amendment that gave women the right to vote because of a couple of Bible verses, then we are seeing an example of strange worship, of idolatry, of hypocrisy.

Preacher and Senator Raphael Warnock has said, "I think we are in a moment where Jesus is a victim of identity theft. I don't know what Bible folks are reading—attacking the poor in the name of the faith."

In this challenging time, in a time when our faith his been hijacked for political purposes, we need to be clear about who we are as people of faith, as Christians.

I think we can take inspiration from Amos, who boldly denounced the idolatry, the hypocrisy, the injustice of his day.

One important thing to know about Amos is that he wasn’t wealthy or powerful. He wasn’t a priest, or a rabbi, or an archbishop. He didn’t have a doctorate in political science from Jerusalem University. He wasn’t a best-selling author on the talk show circuit.

As we learn in the opening of Amos, he was a shepherd from Tekoa, a farming village about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. He was an ordinary person, who apparently stayed close to God and had the courage to speak up when the time came.

Much of Amos is filled with rage and judgment, denouncing the sin of the people. With this series, we're not just about denouncing hypocrisy and idolatry of Christian Nationalism, we want to affirm, to seek the good, we want to reclaim our authentic faith.

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The book *Strange Worship* offers six steps for challenging Christian Nationalism, to get away from “strange worship” and to reclaim our faith.

One of the six steps, the most important one I believe, is to focus anew on the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus came to call us away from strange worship, from sin, from foolishness and selfishness. He called us instead to follow him into new purpose, new meaning—loving God and neighbor, seeking first God’s kingdom.

If you’ve never really learned about the life and teaching of Jesus, if you want to focus anew on the life and teaching of Jesus, a great place to start is by reading the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5, 6, and 7 of the gospel according to Matthew.

In these chapters, Jesus teaches about kindness and compassion, he urges people to pray and give with good intentions, he shares the golden rule of loving one another. And at the end of chapter 7, at the conclusion of the sermon, he reminds us of the connection of hearing and doing, of faith and action, of learning and living—the same message as Amos 5:21-24.

“Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the wind blew and beat against that house. It didn’t fall because it was firmly set on bedrock.”
Matthew 7:24-25 CEB

It’s great that you came to church today. It’s great that you’re worshipping with us via livestream. When you walk out the doors of this building, or you turn off your tablet or phone or computer, I hope and pray that whatever you’ve heard, or sung, or prayed in here will continue out there. I hope and pray you continue learning the teachings and witness of Jesus and do your best to follow him.