

“Beside an Ever-Flowing Stream ”

November 12, 2017

Scripture Lesson: Amos 1: 1-2; 5: 14-15, 21-24

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

This is probably Amos’ most famous quote. His most profound image. His most evocative truth.

Amos is the first of the writing prophets. In the narrative of the Hebrew people, there have been prophets - Elijah, Elisha and others. Before that there were various forms of leadership as this nation of people lived through various experiences and evolutions of seeking to be a faithful people.

In our narrative lectionary journey through this story, we are now moving into a series of weeks where we will hear various prophets. While I referred to Amos as the first of writing prophets, it is unlikely that they actually wrote what we have before us. It is more likely that the words were remembered and recorded. The distinction these prophets have is that biblical books bear their names. Some of the prophets write before the exile into Babylon, some during, some after. That context affects what is written and tone in which it is written.

Amos is a prophet in the 8th century B.C.E., - before exile - and he is seeking to be a reformer in the midst of a faith story that is losing its power as it blends with cultural trends and priorities. We don’t know if Amos would have been more effective if he had written down his thesis and nailed it to a door somewhere.

We don’t know a lot about Amos but there is a reference to his shepherding background. It doesn’t appear that he has gone through a discernment process or a formal training for his role as a prophet. Amos is someone who has been called forth and he travels from the southern kingdom to the northern kingdom - so he is an outsider coming to offer perspective from a different vantage point. (Might be like a minister wearing a Sask Rider tie in Ottawa today!)

It doesn’t appear that he was welcomed with open arms. It doesn’t appear that he was thanked for his words. We hear that the image that introduces him as that he spoke like a roaring lion. If Amos appeared in our context, how would he be regarded, how would he be labeled?

I have a bit of fondness for Amos - but that doesn’t have do so much with what he says, but more

to do with the fact that when I took Hebrew in theological college it was the first 17 verses of Amos 5 that I did a major project on - including a translation from the original Hebrew. I am cautious not to say that I like Amos, because as one commentator says that if you like Amos, you don't understand him!

These are challenging words. It is challenging to hear: a prophet of God say, "I hate, I despise your festivals and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs: ..."

A modern interpretation of Amos - paraphrases those verses from Chapter 5 as:

I hate your church buildings,
I take no delight in your rising membership rolls,
The tinkle of your treasuries gives me an earache!
Take away from my sight your veneer of piety.
To your boast of being a Christian nation I will not listen...

The prophet then says "But let justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?"

The prophets of God invite us to see a larger picture. The prophets of God call us to measure our faithfulness to the values of justice, love, peace, The prophets of God do not accept the social conditions of the day, the status quo - as inevitable, or as acceptable.

The prophets of God are not predicting the future rather than imaging what the future could be. So, there are not detail blueprints of how God will see that it unfolds, but rather a challenge to the faithful - a challenge to those who seek a deeper connection to life and to community and a world where love and peace are known.

Amos offers this image of justice and righteousness to be like a mighty river and an ever-flowing stream - images which in his context would have been dreams in the parched land of desert. They would have stretched the imagination of those listening.

We gather this morning beside an ever flowing stream. Did anyone notice the river as they drove in today? As the Rideau passes by here it is often gently moving and then when you see it at Hogsback, it looks more like a mighty river as it crashes over those rocks.

It is the same river and yet presents as ever-flowing and mighty. Amos pairs justice and righteousness in this prophetic declaration and holds that up as the lens or framework of God's standard or vision for our world and our lives.

Righteousness is living in line with God's vision. Justice is an expectation that all people will have basic needs fulfilled and that there will be a equity or fairness to life.

It is a significant image that we gather beside an everflowing stream because it stands as a reminder of that standard or vision that is sparked in our holy imagination. We know that our world, our society, our lives do not always measure up to those standards, to those possibilities.

The prophets in the biblical record are not writing fantasy or fairy tales. They know the complexity of human behaviour - with the instincts for goodness and love, along with the disguises of evil that surface within and among us. However, the prophetic imagination reaches beyond what is, to invite us deeper into what could be.

So as we live in our society and culture where poverty and extravagance live side by side, where differences generate fear and insecurity, where we classify human beings on a variety of scales and assign respect and power in varying amounts, where do we hear the prophetic imagination inviting us to remember the ever-flowing stream?

Where have all the prophets gone? There are prophetic images offered from pulpits, but I imagine that many of the prophets are those who speak from the edges. I remember being at a conference on poverty a number of years ago in Regina, and there were experts offering their analysis which was important, but the most profound speaker was a man living in poverty and he challenged many of the assumptions that most of us had about him.

There are those who speak with a rage in the soul knowing the injustice and pain in the world. I think of persons such as Stephen Lewis raging about the inaction towards the HIV crisis in Africa. I think of Cindy Blackstock who is persistent in calling for change in attitude and practice on behalf of First Nations children in our nation.

Another category of prophets are some of the comedians in our time. Through their rants and observations and jokes, they are able to help us connect the dots of some of the separate pieces and aspects of life. Details and realities that need to be connected. I heard a clip on the radio the other night of a comedian talking about the anniversary of the election of Trump as president. He was talking about all the accusations of fake news and all the other ways in which truth is compromised in the Trump context. He was questioned about whether it is frustrating to make jokes about all this and not do anything else about it. His reply was that it is the political comedian or satirist's job to bring pieces and details together and it is the people who need to do something about it.

That is a good description of a biblical prophet. Amos describes a reality that he sees and offers an image to spark the imagination of the people.

While we can dismiss Amos words as for another time, another people, we also hear enough in what he says to know that our dominant values fall short of the standards of justice and righteousness.

So, we gather at the river side and are reminded and recharged. For that river runs through us, for

we know we have the capacity to act justly, to show mercy and to walk humbly. As the rivers gather the water throughout the area and channels it towards a greater reality, so too our faithfulness, our instincts for compassion, fairness, generosity can be channeled towards the greater vision that is God. May we listen, may we watch, may we make room for those who may have something important to say, or to live. Amen.