



Irrigation Systems

AMOS 5:10-24 | JUNE 6, 2021

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A very long time ago, there once was a community that did not think of themselves as poor. They carried all they owned and walked for many years to a new land; on its hillsides and in its valleys, they grew crops and raised animals, and they made a decent living. Everyone knew everyone, and considered one another family. They called their land “the promised land” and it was said that it flowed with milk and honey, though of course, it didn’t really. But what mattered most was that this land was given to them by God, and that made it – and them – rich beyond measure. And because they lived for God together, they knew deep joy and satisfaction.

Years passed, and then centuries. The community grew in number from family to tribe to nation, led first by faithful, ordinary men, then by judges, then by kings. By the time of the prophet Amos, this poor but joyful community was known as the nation of Israel, and Israel’s fortunes had changed for the better. The balance of power had shifted in the wider world, a great empire had fallen, and there was room at last for a smaller nation, like Israel, to grow and expand. And they did: establishing trade routes, strengthening the military, creating new business relationships. It was a time of unprecedented prosperity and security, of growth and safety.

But as their wealth grew, so, too, did their greed.

These people who had once seen themselves as family, as clan and tribe, as “us” and “we,” began to sort themselves into categories of rich versus poor, of me versus you. And, as so often happens, the wealthy few seemed to keep getting richer, and the poor kept getting poorer...often because of the ways the wealthy cheated and abused them. Widows and orphaned children went hungry, unprotected and abandoned; the poor were taxed without mercy; the courts dispensed justice in favour of those who could pay for it, rather than those who needed it most. But in the midst of all of this, everyone continued to worship God, to do all the things the members of this family of faith – the people of God – were meant to do...to show gratitude, repentance, respect and reverence to the God who had given them their promised land. Their worship was grand and perfect, the musicians and singers plentiful, the Temple beautiful and affluent, the sacrifices generous. Surely all was well in the nation of Israel.

And then, Amos came down from the hills of Judah.

Amos was a newly called prophet of God. Not one of the semi-professional ones, circulating near the Temple. And not a priest, born and trained to be an intermediary between the people and their God. Amos had been a farmer and a shepherd, until God gave him a message for God's people. And the message was not, "job well done." Instead, the message from Amos was an outpouring of grief and lament over what God's people had become... and a promise of more grief and suffering and destruction to follow, if they did not mend their ways. The message Amos delivers from God is, "watch out." Because the Day of the Lord is coming, and it's not going to be anything like what you expect.

We think of Jesus, now, when we hear "Day of the Lord," and we think joyfully of his return to us, on some future day. But this was back before Jesus' first coming. The Day of the Lord was not the end of the world but the day when God would come and get involved directly, in person, with humanity in a whole new way, setting things right once and for all. God would bring down his justice upon his people's enemies, setting his people free from oppression and abuse forever.

But here is God's prophet, come down from the hills, proclaiming God's lament over what Israel has become, laying out accusations against them, like a list of charges read before a court: you hate the ones who speak truth before your leaders in the gate, you trample on the poor and take away their grain, you afflict the righteous, the good people who remain among you, you take bribes, you push aside those who come to you in need. Contrary to your hopes and expectations, Israel's enemies are not "out there", they are within Israel itself now, and should the Day of the Lord come as you imagine it will, bringing justice and trailing destruction in its wake, if God comes now with things as they are, Amos proclaims, there will be so much grief that you'll be calling up even the farmers to help with the mourning.

I will pass through the midst of you, God says; and you will not escape. Like someone fleeing from a lion only to come face-to-face with a bear, and then, thinking they have escaped the dangers of the wilderness, they catch their breath at home and rest their hand against the wall, only to be bitten by a snake.

And then, horrifyingly, Amos' message gets worse.

Their perfect worship – music and singing, solemn assemblies and yearly festivals, sacrifices and offerings – God rejects it all. God has no interest in their worship, because it clearly means nothing to them: their actions outside of worship do not reflect what they say and sing and do during worship, let alone the character and the values of the God they claim to be worshipping. So don't bother, says God; I don't want it. I'm not listening.

If that doesn't send a shiver down your spine, you are made of sterner stuff than me!

This Scripture text calls what we believe about our relationship with God into question. And that should give us pause...how devastating to imagine that our worship, what we do here together on Sunday mornings, our music and songs, our prayers and preaching, our gifts and celebrations, how devastating to imagine that those things could be despised, hated, even, by God; that our worship could fail to delight the God we love and who loves us. Like we do today, God's people then knew the biblical traditions and how to do worship well. Outwardly, everything was being done correctly, in the same way it had been for centuries by that point. But what they believed about their relationship with God was utterly wrong.

Our own long-held ways of worshipping have been sent into disarray by the pandemic. We'd become pretty attached to those ways, though, hadn't we? The bulletins and flowers, the envelopes and offering plates, the music and bright splashes of colour over the communion table and pulpit...polished and perfect and ready to go. And then the unthinkable happened and we were exiled from our sanctuaries, and we learned what Amos was trying to teach Israel: that how we worship matters far less than why and who we worship.

It's the why and the who of worship that Israel had lost sight of, and it's the why and the who that it's easy for us to lose sight of, too, particularly when the loss of the familiar habits and actions of worship is so very much in our minds. The trouble that God's people had gotten into was the trouble of a divided life: perfect, textbook worship in the Temple, and lives outside the Temple that were geared toward personal gain, that perpetuated injustice, that ignored every law and teaching of God that was meant to shape those lives. Their perfectly-executed worship – their repentance, their prayers, their gratitude, their reading of the laws of God about how to treat the most vulnerable, how to assure fairness and equity in society, the oldest covenant command to be a blessing to others because God had blessed them – not a bit of it had the slightest impact on how they conducted themselves in their day-to-day lives.

And that – that separation of real life from their faith – that’s what caused God to reject their empty, lifeless worship.

Unless our everyday lives line up with the God whom we profess to worship, we needn’t bother to worship at all.

Worship is meant to honour God, and it is also meant to transform us into God’s people, not just in the Temple or the church, but out in the broader community, too. That separation between what we believe about God and the actions that belief demands of us in our lives outside of the church...that’s a division that our own society encourages us to make these days, too. The general consensus now is that our faith and religious life are a private and personal matter, no one’s business but ours, and largely unwelcome in our public lives, whether that’s at work, at school, among friends and acquaintances, even among family. And that division makes it all too easy for us to make that same separation in our heads too, where we turn up for worship and say and do all the right things, and then leave it at the door on the way out, our conduct, our language, our choices out in our real lives completely unaffected by the God whom we worship, our lives untransformed by our relationship with God.

In Israel then, in our lives right now, God expects more from God’s people than a well-honed, predictable and perfectly-conducted worship service.

Many years ago, William Sloan Coffin – a well-known, publicly-active American theologian – was on a political talk show with Henry Kissinger, then Secretary of State. At one point in their conversation, Coffin said to Kissinger, “Henry, do you remember what the Old Testament says: Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Kissinger responded, “how are we supposed to do that?” Coffin replied, “It’s my job to say it. It’s your job to figure out the irrigation system.”

With all due respect to Rev. Coffin, I have to disagree with him a little bit. It’s not just our job to call out society when we see the structures of government and economics fall short.

If we truly believe that this whole world belongs to God, then our worship of God means that we are meant to be the irrigation system for that world, not just point out where there’s a drought.

Our worship is meant to honour and delight God, and it's also supposed to be the thing that propels us out of church and into the world, into our communities, where we are each called to find ways to irrigate our daily lives and the lives of those who know us with the waters of justice and righteousness. According to Amos, unless we live for God by living for others, what we do in church doesn't matter – to us or to God – at all. And it's not a few missions or outreach programs now and then, by a few of us, that does the trick. Those are good places to start, but justice and righteousness should flow continually from us like a year-round river, not a seasonal run-off stream.

The question, of course, is how. And that's different for each one of us, because each of our lives offer us unique opportunities to live justly. If you are a businessperson, it's in how you conduct your business and treat your employees. If you're a teacher, it's in how you teach. If you're a friend or family member, it's in how you support and care for them. Whoever you are in the world, whatever you do, God calls you to pour out his justice by your every action and word.

What made the coming of God – the Day of the Lord – something for God's people to fear, something that we might well worry about, too, is a deep disconnect between the God we worship and the God of our daily lives, a division within us between who we promise to be in worship and who we truly are once the last amen is said.

God wants us to be whole people and wholly his; God expects that if we truly worship him, honestly and with our whole hearts, that we will be inspired to create the community God had in mind when he first created us and called us into life together in his image. It's the same community that Jesus taught about in parables and sermons, what he called the kingdom of God, coming and yet already here, in the well-irrigated gardens that grow from the lives of his faithful, worshipping people. Our worship is true and full and a delight to God when it transforms us. Not just for the hour or so we spend in active, communal worship; not just in our own private spiritual life. God calls us to worship and to become conduits, open pipelines of the mighty, world re-shaping, soul refreshing waters of justice and righteousness, to live the faith that we profess, to live for God by living for others. Thanks be to God! Amen.