

“Weather Warnings and Other Words”
Amos 1:1-2; 2:6-16/Mark 3:1-6
FPC/February 21, 2010/1st Sunday of Lent
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

“Winter Storm Warning”.....we have become familiar with the announcement lately. “Winter Storm Warning”.....such was the announcement on the Friday my brother flew in to visit on Super Bowl weekend. His plane was the last one out of Baltimore before they closed the airport due to snow. When I picked him up in Pittsburgh the snow was just started to stick on the ground. The next morning Pittsburgh awoke to two feet of snow and ice, and 100,000 people in Allegheny County were out of electricity. My brother was delayed three days in getting home.

“Winter Storm Warning”.....we have continued to get the announcements over the last couple weeks, and the snow has fallen. Shoveling, school delays and cancellations, and ice sickles have become a new way of life.

“Winter Storm Warning”.....it’s an announcement we pay attention to, as real storms follow the words.

This season of Lent we are going to take a brief look at the Old Testament prophet Amos, and hear his own “Winter Storm Warning;” words that precede another storm, because God is coming.

II. Text and Exegesis

Read Amos 1:1

Amos means “burden or burden barrier,” a tipoff that he brings a “heavy message.” Amos was a sheep rancher from the small town of Tekoa, a few miles outside of Jerusalem. He appears to have been a type of “gentleman rancher;” working his sheep ranch and business during the day, and reading the Wall Street Journal at night. Most prophets at this time were professionals, employed by kings and religious leaders. Amos was not a professional, and he was not paid to deliver his message. Rather, he was a layperson, and his message was delivered because he believed it.

The year was about 750BCE. Israel, the northern half of the old kingdom of Israel, had enjoyed 40 years of peace and prosperity. It was the peak of their power and wealth. And as we know, in such times those with wealth and power often want more, at the expense of the poor and powerless. But a “Winter Storm” was coming.

Read Amos 1:2

“The Lord roars from Zion.” It’s the distant roar of a lion that precedes him, and the savanna is thrown into a panic. It’s the boom of thunder as a storm approaches, and picnickers scurry for cover. It’s a “Winter Storm Warning,” and people ask each other, “How much snow now?” and rush to the store for bread and milk. And the roar, the thunder, the warning.....it is the prophecy of Amos, the roar that precedes the coming of the Lord.

(Summary of Amos 1:3-2:5)

And so, the warning comes; Amos roars. “For three transgression of Syria, for four....for the sins of Syria.....God’s judgment comes.” People stop to listen to Amos. “Did he say Syria? Good, I never liked them anyway.”

“For the sins of Philistia.....God’s judgment comes.” “Great,” the people say. “They deserve it.” More people stop to listen.

“For the sins of Tyre and Edom..... God’s judgment comes.” By now a crowd is gathering. The excitement is building. Cheers punctuate the words of prophet as he announces God’s judgment on the neighboring nations.

“For the sins of Ammon and Moab.....God’s judgment comes.” A great roar goes up from the wildly enthusiastic crowd. The crowd answers Amos, “The God of Israel is the God of all, and those pagans will pay for their unbelief.”

“For the sins of Judah.....God’s judgment comes.” There is the greatest roar of the crowd yet. A ripple of approval moves across the crowd; “Our God is holy and just, and our cousins to the south will get theirs. And their loss will be our gain; property, wealth, and commerce. Preach it, prophet!”

Amos now has them in his hand. The excitement has built. They hang now on his every word.....straining to hear his words of God’s judgment coming to others. Amos has used their pride and self-righteousness to bait his trap. He has one final word of God’s judgment to announce: “For the sins of Israel.....God’s judgment comes.” “What?” The crowd is stunned. “Did he say, ‘Israel?’ He couldn’t have said ‘Israel.’ That’s us.” But, indeed, that is exactly what Amos said.

Read Amos 2:6-8

The trap is now sprung. The lion roars. A winter storm is coming. The evil done in secret is now revealed to all. The debts of the honest poor are foreclosed, and they are sold into slavery. The poor are oppressed. Justice is bought, and the courts are corrupt. Domestic servants are sexually abused without any regard to God, morality, or care for the weak. The rich work the credit system, and take even the little that the poor have. A mirror has been held up. The crowd now goes silent. The reflection is not pretty.

Read Amos 2:9-12

The story of their history is told. It's the story of God's grace and power for them. It's the story of the gift of the land. It's the story of the escape from Egyptian slavery.....the Exodus.....and the story of God protecting them in the wilderness. It's the story of prophets and nazirites, special people called by God to speak God's word and show faithfulness. But they have corrupted the story. They choose to believe that God's grace is about foolish privilege, and not special responsibility. So a winter storm is coming.

Read Amos 2:13-16

A "Winter Storm Warning" has been issued. The prophet announces God's coming judgment. He says it will be like a heavy cart rolling across a wheat field, pressing down the wheat and leaving tracks. So the arrogant and self-righteous will be pressed down in the coming judgment. And even Israel's proud army, the sign of their power and might, will be destroyed. The swift and the strong will fall. Those especially skilled with bow and on horseback shall not save their lives. And only a few of the most courageous will crawl away naked and humiliated.

By now the crowd around Amos is growing restless and angry. "How dare he pretend to speak for God against us." Perhaps the sky was blue that day, and the sun was shining. They told themselves, "The Winter Storm Warning is only the word of a fool." They went home that day, and nothing changed. They did not see the gathering clouds on the horizon. They did not heed the warning. But in 30 years a storm called the nation of Assyria would sweep through the land, and all that Amos said would come true.....and the nation of Israel would be gone.

In a small synagogue another storm was brewing. Again God's people had forgotten that God's grace for them meant special responsibilities, not special privilege. Again the rich and powerful were working the system, and the poor and powerless were abused. Again they expected the judgment of God to fall on others, and not themselves.

The words of Amos come alive again in Jesus Christ. A man with a crippled hand is healed on the Sabbath.....because the Sabbath and the grace of God are about life and salvation. The crippled, the poor, and the marginal have a place in the kingdom of God. But once again the words of warning are ignored.....and those in power conspired on how to silence this prophet and miracle worker named Jesus.

But another storm was coming. It was the storm of the cross and resurrection. It was the storm of the Holy Spirit. It was the storm of the Church; Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women, slaves and children, those with cripple hands and those who have been healed.

And “Winter Storm Warnings” can still be heard.....if we listen. Because God’s grace and salvation are still about responsibility, and not privilege. And justice and care for the weak is still part of the dawning kingdom of God.

III. Reflections

How might we 21st C people hear Amos? Perhaps we find ourselves in a position much like the audience that first heard Amos; peace and prosperity has brought great wealth to some, but increasingly the poor and powerless are exploited by the rich and powerful. Like them we are tempted to enthusiastically cheer God’s judgment on others..... terrorists, gays and lesbians, Muslims, and those on the extreme Right or Left, and then become angry when a mirror is held up to show our own moral failings. And the Christian moral discourse around us is limited and dominated by the topics of abortion, sex and homosexuality.....while there is little conversation about:

The richest nation in the history of the world’s failure to provide some type of health care for its poorest and weakest members;

The use and attempted justification of torture as “enhanced interrogation techniques;”

The terrible cost of a war to our soldiers and their families, and to the citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan;

The rise in credit card interest rates to 20%, 30% and 40% to the poorest people;

The stewardship of natural resources.....think what you will about global warming, but at the very least we are called to be better stewards of God’s gift of a good creation.

And like those folks that first heard Amos, we often believe the gift of God’s grace and power is about privilege, and not responsibility. In the May 19, 2009 Christian Century (pp. 20-23) Greg Boyd, pastor of a large church in St. Paul, Minnesota insightfully wrote this:

“Welcome to ‘McChurch,’ where you are served a gospel tailor-made to suit your personal tastes and needs....one that never confronts you or causes you any discomfort.

“McChurch not only fails to confront the idols and pagan values of Western culture, it often Christianizes them. According to McChurch, not only do we not have to give up our possessions, as Jesus commands, but following Jesus ensures that we’ll get more of them. Not only do we not have to love and serve our enemies, as Jesus commands, but God is on our side when we applaud our nation for bombing those enemies.

“If you’re looking for an explanation as to why studies confirm that there’s hardly any difference between churchgoers and non-churchgoers in terms of their core values, I suggest you’ve just found it.” (Western consumer culture has become Western

Christian culture, and too few of us know the difference.) Greg Boyd sound a little like Amos.

So how are we to hear Amos? How are we to hear the “Winter Storm Warning?” My wife Jeanne is reading Garrison Keillor’s recent book, Life Among the Lutherans, and in that book Keillor shares these wise words:

“The people who occupy the pews of Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church on Sunday are ordinary people, doing their best to be good and walk straight in a world that seems to reward the crooked and mock the righteous. They gather together and give alms to the poor; they sing ‘Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring,’ so that the tears come to your eyes; and they pray to God, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not way from thy presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation...’ And then they go home and put on their work clothes and tend their flower beds and groom their lawns. While they do their best to love each other, they also watch each other very closely. There is gossip, on occasions. There are cold-shoulder treatments and grudges and ferocious rivalries. Despite one’s best efforts, envy of achievements of someone else’s children is a tough thing to deny.

“So back to church they go, seeking forgiveness and grace. Church is a place where, like Robert Frost said, ‘when you go there, they have to take you in.’ You can come back every Sunday promptly, or come back on Easter and Christmas if that’s what you can manage. If you wander in and find a potluck supper is going on and you forgot to bring a hot dish, it’s okay-Lutherans always have extra. And there always is coffee. It may not be the best coffee, but it’s good enough.” (p.3)

That’s a pretty good way to hear Amos; honesty, humility, grace and trying again. And those folks in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota know all about “Winter Storm Warnings.”