

The Unfinished Work Amos 5:18-24

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost/ 8th November 2020

It's been a long, emotional week, hasn't it? Government of the people, by the people, and for the people is a beautiful thing. It's also messy and exhausting, requiring patience and mutual forbearance. And the drama continues.

Thankfully, the lectionary for this week is timely, especially the reading from Amos. The text summons us to step out of the fray, pulls us out from the mass hysteria and anxiety of this year's election, calls us away from the television and endless news analysis and reporting, out from the worry and concern over what will happen next, out beyond ideological affiliations.

The prophet Amos calls God's people to *stop, wake up, and look*. Earlier in Amos 5 we hear these words, "For thus says Yahweh to the house of Israel: 'Seek me and live.'" "Seek the LORD and live, or God will break out against the house of Joseph..." (Amos 5:6).

Tough words, to be sure. But that's what prophets do. Prophets speak on behalf of God a word of judgment, but also a word of hope. They call us back to our roots, to what matters most. Very often the hope is contingent upon coming to grips with the judgment, God's judgment against the people for their sins, for their injustice, for their complicity in systems of injustice that place a heavy burden upon God's people. The prophet Amos calls God's people to come clean, acknowledge their sins, and reprioritize their values. We are to align our values with what God values. And what God values most is justice and righteousness.

If you read the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament and can't see that justice and righteousness are near to the heart of God, then you haven't really heard the Word of God, and you're missing out on what makes the gospel good news. Justice. Righteousness. These are loaded words and are often misunderstood or misappropriated. In the Bible, justice and righteousness are almost interchangeable. In the Bible justice *does not* mean getting even. Justice and righteousness are relational words; they describe the life-giving way God relates to humanity and the way humans are to relate to each other in life-giving ways. Righteousness means "right-relating." These words suggest relationships that are fair and honest and authentic. Justice means fairness, equality, inclusion, healing, wholeness. It means putting to right that which is wrong. Justice and righteousness are holy because God is righteous and relates to us with justice. Contemporary theologian Cornel West's definition of the word justice is perfect. He says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." The life of faith can never be a private affair, it always has a public dimension, touching the lives of people in relationships, in the streets, in the public square.

That's what Amos is getting at in his book, especially in this chapter. He's channeling God's anger with the people precisely because they have become selfish. They have forgotten the needs of the common good. They have forgotten that God requires from God's people a commitment to and embodiment of justice. They have forgotten who God really is. "Ah," says Amos, "you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!" (Amos 5:7).

Unless they get their act together the future looks grim. Amos doesn't hold back. He says, "They hate the one who reproves in the gate" (Amos 5:10), meaning they hate God because God rebukes those in the gate, meaning the judgment seat of the city which was situated at the entrance of Jewish cities. They hate God for reproving them for their injustice. "They hate," he says, "the one who speaks the truth. Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them"—that's the judgment—"you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine" (Amos 5:11). Amos judges the rich who have become so on the backs of the poor. "For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the need in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time" (Amos 5:12-13). Amos warns: "Seek good and not evil. Abhor evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:15), meaning where they live, at the center of their communities, at the center of the nation.

And then Amos goes after their false piety and false religiosity. They cry, "Lord, Lord." They cry for the Lord's protection, for God to be on their side, pining for the "day of the Lord." But the "day of the Lord is darkness, not light" (Amos 5:18), and there's nowhere to hide. Amos speaks for God and says, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies" (Amos 5:21), meaning worship. "You offer me offerings...I look away" (Amos 5:22). Offerings to bribe God, to make God happy, to get God to give you what you want, secure your comfort, your well-being all at the expense of the poor, the marginalized, the widow, the vulnerable, the helpless. God says, "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to melody of your harps" (Amos 5:23). The offering God desires, the kind of worship God wants from us, the kind of life, the kind of relationships God wants for us are offerings and worship and life and relationships that are shaped by justice. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Justice is what God wants from and for God's people. Jesus' life and ministry further embody this vision for he, too, came to establish justice in the gate, in the streets where we live. That's what the kingdom, the *kin-dom* of God is all about. Didn't Jesus say at the start of his ministry in Capernaum, channeling the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). That was his ministry, his work. This is *our* ministry, *our* work.

And this is true for the church no matter who sits in the White House or which party has majority in Congress. Both parties, indeed, every political party and philosophy falls short of the glory of God—very short indeed. One of my friends posted on Facebook this week that Christians need to remember that our ultimate allegiance is not to a political party, we give our allegiance neither to the Donkey nor to the Elephant but to the Lamb and we don't look to the Donkey or the Elephant to save us but to the Lamb. President Dwight David Eisenhower (1890-1969)—a Presbyterian, by the way, baptized at National Presbyterian Church, ten days after taking the oath of office—said, "If a political party does not have its foundation in the determination to advance a cause that is right and that is moral, then it is not a political party; it is merely a conspiracy to seize power."¹

On Election Day we were in Washington, DC. Mark wanted to vote in-person. After voting we drove down Connecticut Avenue and saw the banks and businesses and office windows all boarded up. We both felt that we needed to go to the Lincoln Memorial, to be in that hallowed space. It's my favorite memorial in DC, and Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) is my favorite president. I must say that it was very emotional walking up those steps and standing before Lincoln's statue.

I went over to the north wall to read, again, Lincoln's [Second Inaugural Address](#), a profoundly theological reflection. We don't often think of Lincoln engaging in theological speech, but he did, quite a lot, especially after the death of his son William at age eleven in 1862. Lincoln was counseled in his grief by the Rev. Phineas Gurley (1816-1868), pastor at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where Lincoln often worshipped. At one point during the war one of Lincoln's advisors said he was grateful that God was on the side of the Union, to which Lincoln replied, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." This humility before God runs right through the Second Inaugural, given on March 4, 1865. With the war almost over, Lincoln could have given a speech boasting victory for the North and promising further devastation and punishment of the South for the sin of slavery. But he didn't do that. Instead he said the entire country was guilty of the sin, but he pleaded for reconciliation and unity—and he was soundly criticized for it.² He concluded with words that continue to stir the heart, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."



And then I went over to the south wall and read, again, the [Gettysburg Address](#). "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead

we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

I was struck by something I had never noticed before. In both speeches Lincoln inspires us to “finish the work,” to be dedicated to “the unfinished work” before us. He was, of course, referring to America’s unfinished work of living up to and embodying the ideals it claims to be true, and to bind up the wounds caused by slavery, America’s original sin. To bind up the wounds caused by division and war. We are still struggling to live up to these ideals. We know, today, there’s much healing that needs to be done for the wounds of our society are many. We also know there are forces within us and within our society that are working against this vision of healing. In the only photo we have of Lincoln giving the Second Inaugural one can pick out, up to the right of Lincoln, looking down at on Lincoln’s left, the face of John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865), who actually attended a former military academy here in Catonsville.³ Looking down. The ones who are against that vision of reconciliation and unity.

Binding up the wounds of the nation is another way of striving for justice at the gate, that which is fair and good and whole, love in public. It’s about claiming that we have a responsibility for our neighbor, for their welfare and wellbeing. We owe that to each other. David Dark, a writer who provocatively explores what it means to be Christian in America today said, on Election Day, “America is a long, sometimes bitter, sometimes violent, sometimes beautiful conversation about what human beings owe each other.”

Unfinished work. I sensed, standing in the Lincoln Memorial, that’s also a good description of what’s before us as a *church*. Whatever happens in the days and weeks ahead—and things could become very stormy—may we be clear about the work set before the church: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” That’s the unfinished work set before us as God’s people. The church as healer. Helping to bind up the wounds, the nation’s wounds, the wounds of God’s people. In this time full of fear and distrust and anxiety and bitterness and suspicion and division, there is work for the church to do, to embody God’s reconciling love, with malice toward none, walking in the steps of “that still more excellent way” (1 Cor.12:31), the way of “charity,” as the King James Version says, the way of love and mercy and grace. Love within, love toward neighbor, love in public, the work of justice.



President Abraham Lincoln giving the Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

¹ From a speech given on July 12, 1945.

² See Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

³ The previously unknown photo was recently discovered in the Library of Congress. See: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19094867>.