

“The Day of the Lord”

One of the classes I took in seminary was called ‘Book of the Twelve,’ which is another name for the section of the Bible that includes Amos, as well as Jonah, Micah, and all the other prophetic books that aren’t big enough to hit someone with. And so we worked our way through all twelve of the prophetic books in the Book of the Twelve, and concluded the class by writing a paper and doing a project based on one passage from one of the books.

Our passage from Amos this morning was my passage. I read about it; I had a whole stack of books in my room all on Amos, and a folder on my computer of articles I’d downloaded. I took copious notes, because that’s how I research, and wrote a paper, and wrote a short story about the passage and it was a really great experience—so great, in fact, that I had all these wonderful memories about this passage, and so I came back to it this week and was totally shocked by how not-happy and not-hopeful it is: for Amos himself calls the day of the Lord “darkness” and “gloom,” and that’s really all this passage is.

Amos starts by talking about the day of the Lord—in Jewish thought, this was a similar idea to a Christian conception of Judgment Day, when Christ will return to earth to judge and save humanity and the earth will be made new at last. Jews imagined a day when God would return and defeat their enemies, both human and those found in natural forces. Life would be glorious and free.

We do that too, don’t we? I have absolutely been guilty of that—everything will be better when God comes again. And that’s not wrong or incorrect. The world will absolutely be a better place, and I believe in that. But—Amos compares the day of the Lord to someone who is running so hard from a chasing lion, but then they are instead mauled by a bear—and it’s unclear whether this person was fleeing so desperately from the lion that they didn’t see the bear, or if they had finally relaxed because they thought they had escaped and so were taken unawares, but either way—there was this unexpected, gut-wrenchingly deadly danger. And the day of the Lord is, too, like someone who goes into the refuge of their home, a place of rest and safety, leans against the wall, and is bitten by a snake.

And the theme of these stories of the day of the Lord is the unexpected danger,

relief plunged into despair and death—for “Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?”

Why?

Why does Amos describe the day of the Lord as a day of darkness and gloom, when everyone else expected it to be a day of freedom and joy?

Amos goes on to say, speaking the word of the Lord that was given to him:

“I hate, I despise your festivals,

and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even 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.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)

They had gotten God all wrong. They thought that if they said the right words, went to the right festivals and made the right sacrifices on the right days, than they would be good to go—the day of the Lord would be a day of reckoning for their enemies, but not for them, because they did everything right and they understood God perfectly and they did every single thing they were supposed to do.

We all know how that went—within a hundred years the people had been scattered across the Near East, their nation had been shattered and the Temple destroyed. They were not good to go—this was a time when the prophets cried out for the sake of the workers who were being cheated, the people who were being unjustly enslaved, the tenants who were being evicted or charged untenable rents.

The people cannot divorce their lives from their worship—we cannot worship God well when our lives are full of cruelty and lies and willful forgetfulness—they cannot say that their down-to-the-letter perfect worship wipes out every terrible thing they did before they came to worship, not when their hearts remain the same and they do not change.

They try—they are convinced that they have done it—but, if they do not change, they are

wrong.

This is a hard thing to preach. Where is the line between grace and judgment? I don't know how to distinguish between them here, because we all come to worship having sinned. We have all lied and cheated and just sinned this past week. We were not perfect before we came to worship. And God's grace reaches out to us in the midst of that. We are forgiven.

But still we are called to be better than we were—to let our worship bleed into our lives, to let the words we say together as our liturgy and the hymns we sing and the truths we confess influence how we live between Sunday and Sunday. We are called to love one another, to let God's love be visible to others through us.

And maybe the difference isn't that we worship better, or even live better—the difference is what we have faith in. The Israelites had faith in their worship, that if they just followed the rules and did worship just right then they would be saved. We are called to believe in more than worship; we are called to believe in Jesus Christ our Savior, and then let that belief wash through the rest of our lives, into every nook and cranny so that we reflect God's love into the world.

And so let us be the people we are called to be—people who trust in God our Savior, and people who love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our minds and all our strength, and people who therefore love those around them.

Amen.