

Our St. Barnabas community has a reputation for its ministry of hospitality. We must be careful when we say that, because most every congregation fancies itself as being a welcoming place, when in fact it may only be welcoming of people who meet certain criteria. It is relatively easy to welcome someone who is similar to us in income, education, race, and values. It is a challenge to be truly hospitable to those who differ from us in any of these ways. That being said, I hear enough compliments from people outside of St. Barnabas about our ministry of hospitality that I think we can safely say that we are at least “above average.”

This morning our sense of hospitality is going to be tested. Two people with prickly personalities have shown up and they are going to make us uncomfortable. We are faced with the questions, “will such strident people be welcomed and allowed to be part of the St. Barnabas community?” “Will we listen to what they have to say without dismissing them as wing nuts and hoping that they just go away?”

The names of these difficult visitors are Amos and Isaiah. Their writings are the basis of the anthem that Jeff Whitmill has written and the Senior Choir will sing. In reality, the anthem is the sermon and Amos and Isaiah speak for themselves. These comments of mine might better be understood as program notes, some information that will help you better grasp their message. Then you can argue with Amos and Isaiah whether or not their message is pertinent for our community today.

Amos lived about 760 B.C. This is about 200 years after the reign of King David, perhaps 500 years after Moses and the Exodus. When David’s son, Solomon, died about 925 B.C., the kingdom of Israel had split in two. The Northern Kingdom retained the name Israel and had its capital in Samaria and the Southern Kingdom became known as Judah with its capital in Jerusalem. In 760, both countries were experiencing an era of peace and prosperity. The people were religious in the sense that they attended worship, prayed, and observed the prescribed fasts and festivals. They understood their prosperity to be an indication of God’s blessing. From Amos’ point of view, however, it was also an era of injustice, for he asserts that part of the reason many had accumulated great wealth was because they had ignored God’s call to care for the poor among them. So Amos walks into town and gets in their face, so to speak.

It is important to understand that Amos is an outsider. He is from the southern kingdom of Judah and he has traveled 20-25 miles north into Israel and speaks his message there. Kind of like someone from Iowa coming up and criticizing us in Minnesota. But Amos is a masterful speaker. He crafts his presentation so that the citizens of Israel get caught in his rhetorical trap.

Geography plays an important role in his strategy, so please look at the map. He begins by announcing that the LORD God is really ticked. In his anger the LORD roars like a lion so loudly that the LORD’s voice from the temple on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem melts the snow on the top of Mount Carmel 85 miles to the north. Then Amos identifies the reason for the LORD’s anger by criticizing Israel’s neighbors. In the anthem Jeff condenses this down to three neighbors – Damascus, Ammon, and Judah – but Amos actually names seven neighbors in a similar pattern. For crime after crime of Damascus, I will send judgment on them. For crime after crime of Gaza, I will send judgment on them. For crime after crime of Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab, I will send judgment on them. You can imagine the citizens of Israel nodding along with Amos, agreeing that their neighbors have many faults and it is proper for God to punish them for their deeds.

It is important to recognize that Amos does something new here by saying that the LORD God, the God of Israel, will hold these other countries accountable for their deeds, even though they do not recognize and worship the LORD God. Up to this point, the people of Israel assumed that each country had its own gods. Amos is among the first to proclaim a true monotheism. There is only one God, and it is the LORD God, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Moses, and David.

Then Amos condemns his own country, the land of Judah, but for a very different reason. The first six countries were condemned for acts of violence. Judah is condemned for not keeping the law of the LORD. Again, the people of Israel no doubt nodded along approvingly that Amos was pointing out the faults of others.



Then Amos lowers the boom. For crime after crime of Israel, I will grant them no reprieve. Why? Because they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes. They take advantage of the poor. Amos is rolling now and he doesn't speak in a quiet voice. Jeff depicts the anger of Amos quite well, I think. Amos is forceful and relentless. In the section from Amos 5, Jeff has each section of the choir hurl simultaneous accusations, putting the people of Israel back on their heels. Amos says the LORD disdains their outward religious activities, their feasts, ceremonies, and songs of praise, for these activities are not accompanied by care for their neighbor.

Jeff then has the women sing in Latin a psalm of repentance to indicate that Amos' audience has been convicted. They realize Amos speaks the truth and they say, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. If you were to remember our sins, LORD, who could stand?"

And underneath the men sing, not the words of Amos, but the words of Isaiah 58. This section of Isaiah was written about 250 years after Amos in a very different context. In the intervening years, both Israel and Judah had been conquered and had ceased to exist as countries. The people of Judah had been in exile in Babylon for 50-70 years, but some had now returned to Jerusalem and were trying to rebuild the city. It was not a time of peace and prosperity, but a time of economic recession and despair. The people "get religion" thinking that God will turn things around for them if they fast and pray and give their offerings. But the prophet of Isaiah 58 speaks in kinship with Amos – (*this is God speaking*)

"You ask my counsel day by day. You say you delight in knowing my ways. You say you come with joy into my presence. But your fast (your religious observances) lead to wrangling and strife. Is this the kind of fast you think is pleasing to me, a day of sackcloth and ashes?"

"No, this is what I expect of you, my people – to loose the fetters of injustice, to untie the knot of ev'ry yoke that binds people, to share your food with the hungry and take care of the homeless poor.

"When you act in this way, THEN shall your light break forth like the dawn. Then your deeds will shine in a way that is pleasing to God. Then the LORD will answer when you call to him and say, "Here I am!"

Amos and Isaiah are prickly personalities who are loud and in your face. They insist on being part of the conversations we are having today. Jeff wrote the first version of this anthem over 30 years ago when he was teaching at a junior college in Texas, and Amos and Isaiah had something to say to the issues of the 1980's. Today, whether we like it or not, they demand to be part of our conversations about affordable housing, mass shootings, tax policy, immigration policy, and health care. So brace yourselves. They are going to say things that may make us feel uncomfortable. But the Jewish and Christian communities have for 25 centuries acknowledged that these men speak the Word of the LORD to us, so let's hear what they have to say.

"Then Shall Your Light" - Jeff Whitmill

This translation of the Hebrew texts is from the New English Bible.

You can listen to a recording at <http://stbarnabaslutheran.org/then-shall-your-light/>

Amos 1 The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem;
the shepherds' pastures are scorched,
the top of Carmel is dried up.

For crime after crime of **Damascus**, I will grant them no reprieve
because they threshed Gilead under sledges spiked with iron.
Therefore, I will send fire to eat up the palaces;
I will crush the great men, and send the people away.

For crime after crime of the **Ammonites**, I will grant them no reprieve,
in their greed for land they invaded the ploughlands of Gilead.
Therefore I will set fire to the walls of their palaces;
war cries and whirlwinds shall carry them into exile.

Amos 2 For crime after crime of **Judah**, I will grant them no reprieve
because they spurned the law of the Lord and did not observe his decrees.
Therefore I will send fire upon Judah
that shall consume all the palaces of Jerusalem.

For crime after crime of **Israel**, I will grant them no reprieve
because they sell the innocent for silver and the destitute for a pair of shoes.
They grind the heads of the poor into the earth
and thrust the humble out of their way.
They made the Nazirites drink wine,
and said to the prophets, "You shall not speak."

Amos 5 You that turn justice upside down and bring righteousness to the ground,
You that persecute the guiltless, and throw the destitute out of court,
You that hate honesty in judges and loathe a man who tells the truth,
You that lay taxes on the poor and exact tribute from them,
Shame on you who live at ease, and you, untroubled on the hills.
I hate, I spurn your pilgrim feasts;
I will not delight in your sacred ceremonies.
Spare me the sound, the sound of your songs; I cannot endure your music.

Psalms 130	<i>De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine, Domine, Domine. Si delictorum memoriam servaveris, Domine, quis sustinebit?</i>	Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. If you were to remember our sins, Lord, who could stand?
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Isaiah 58 You ask my counsel day by day.
You say you delight in knowing my ways.
You say you come with joy into my presence.
But your fast leads to wrangling and strife.
Is it a fast like this I require, a day of sackcloth and ashes?
Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

Is not this the fast I require of you:
to loose the fetters of injustice,
untie the knot of very yoke,
to set free those who have been crushed?
Is it not sharing your food with the hungry,
taking the homeless poor into your house,
clothing the naked when you meet them
and not turning from your own flesh and blood?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and you will grow healthy, like a wound newly healed.

If you do away with the with yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
If you feed the hungry from your own plenty and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
Then shall your light rise like dawn out of darkness,
and your night become like noonday!

Then, if you call, the LORD will answer;
if you cry to him, he will say, "Here I am!"