

Let Freedom Ring
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First Presbyterian Church
Elizabethton, Tennessee
January 14, 2007
*Celebrating the Witness of
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King*

*Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of
hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the lord, the God
of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant
of Joseph.
--Amos 5:14-15*

Today's sermon is not about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
It isn't about civil rights.
It is not about his life as a preacher, a scholar, an activist, an orator, a
husband, a father, and a leader.

It isn't about the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to move to the back of the
bus.
It is not about the Montgomery bus boycott that followed—when for over a
year, blacks in Montgomery, Alabama refused to ride those buses that
humiliated black people.
It was difficult. The bus was for most of them their only transportation to
work to family to church. But they stuck with it. They helped each other
find rides when they could. And they walked. They refused to let their
temporary suffering keep them from achieving their higher goal—of dignity
and justice.
This sermon is not about that either.

It is not about marches and protests. It is not about sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, when black students would sit at all-white counters and when asked to leave, would not leave. When tormented, would not retaliate; when struck with fists, would not strike back. When arrested, sat in jail. This sermon is not about that.

It is not about lynchings, cross-burnings, fire hoses, name-calling, and beatings.

It is not about integrating schools, supreme court decisions, the national guard, the voting rights act and “I Have a Dream.”

It is not about drinking fountains and restrooms marked “whites only” and others marked “colored.” It is not about “whites only” signs on public swimming pools and restaurants, either.

This sermon is not about Bull Connor and his dogs or George Wallace or Strom Thurmond.

It is not about just wages for sanitation workers, fair housing laws, the Vietnam War, and the poor people’s march. It is not about the freedom rides, protest songs, and the letter from Birmingham jail.

It is not about the assassination of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King.

None of that. This sermon is not about any of that.

This sermon is not about how a young preacher from Georgia informed a prosperous and yet deaf and blind America that there was injustice in their own house.

This sermon is not about his sermons.

It is not about his use of biblical imagery, his skill as an orator, his ability to speak to both secular and religious audiences, and his articulation of the prophets’ call to justice.

This sermon is not about how Martin Luther King Jr. followed in the footsteps of the prophet Amos, who 2700 years before him ignited fiery words at both princes and priests.

This sermon is not about Martin Luther King.

This sermon is about Amos.

Between the years 760 and 750 BCE, a shepherd, not a trained speaker, not one of the prophetic guild, was roused out of his field. What would it take to rouse a shepherd? What did he see, what did he feel, that would cause him to leave his peaceful setting and speak harsh words in a smooth season?

Between 786 and 746 BCE, Jeroboam II was the leader of the Northern Kingdom which was called Israel. Jeroboam II had been doing well. The entire country was doing quite nicely. During this period, Israel had attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity that would never be seen again. They had built and maintained extravagant shrines to the God of Israel. Many believed God rewarded them for doing this. Their strong military and economic affluence were signs that God had blessed them. Big religion, big country, big military, big God. It all seemed to go together.

But something didn't sit right with Amos.

He saw ruthless violence and revenge among political leaders:

*"...he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity;
He maintained his anger perpetually, and kept his wrath forever."* (1:11)

Amos saw what nations would do in order to expand their interests. In the pursuit of progress, nothing stops them:

"...they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead in order to enlarge their territory." (1:13)

Amos saw the people who did not benefit from national prosperity. For Amos, the laws of economics were not more important than the actual people who suffered because of them:

*"...they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—
They who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
And push the afflicted out of the way..."* (2:6-7)

It irritated Amos to see the rich lend money at interest, to take the last dime from the most vulnerable and spend that dime on wine and drink it in church:

*“...they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge;
And in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they have imposed. (2:8)*

Amos saw that those who put their efforts into strong defenses lost sight of what they were defending themselves against and began to oppress their own people:

“They do not know how to do right, says the Lord., those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.” (3:10)

I have to think that Amos would have preferred to hang out with his sheep and not get involved. This is what Amos said about himself:

“I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ (7:14-15)

Now, I am not sure how exactly the Lord told Amos what to do. My hunch is that Amos could no longer live with his conscience once his eyes were opened to the injustice he saw around him. He must have come to a point where he said, “I cannot go on seeing this and doing nothing. I have to say something to somebody.”

And say something he did. He went right up to Jeroboam II’s private priest and told him a thing or two. The priest told the king that Amos was crazy and should be locked up. Amos. Amos was expelled from the royal sanctuary. They religious and political authorities really didn’t want him raising trouble at the National Cathedral.

But Amos wasn’t finished. He saw how the rich in their greed found loopholes in the laws designed to offer rest and justice for the working poor. He stood up and spoke clearly:

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy,

*and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain;
and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."*

He spoke about what he saw, no more, no less:

"...you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain." (5:11)

"...you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate." (5:12)

Amos had harsh words for those who didn't seem to care that others didn't have enough. Amos was angry with those who hid behind the laws that they had created. Amos said that one day they will get theirs:

*"Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
And lounge on their couches,
And eat lambs from the flock,
And calves from the stall;
Who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
And like David improvise on instruments of music;
Who drink wine from bowls,
And anoint themselves with the finest oils,
But are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
And the revelry of the loungers shall pass away." (6:4-7)*

I don't read these words of Amos about someone else. They are for me. I read them as I feel sharp thorns in my side, as pangs to my conscience, as a call to wake up, and to look around to ask questions.

As I live here, in America, the country that I love, in 2007, the words of Amos pierce my conscience:

*What will I allow before I am finally disgusted enough to speak out?
What will I allow the leadership to do for the sake of my comforts?*

*Will I sell the righteous for cheap gas and the needy for a barrel of oil?
What will I overlook?
What will I justify?
What will I rationalize?*

What seemed to bother Amos the most, was this strange feeling of exceptionalism that the people had about themselves. Because they were religious, went to church, offered their sacrifices, performed rituals, prayed in their Sunday best, and confessed in hushed and holy tones their sacred words, they convinced themselves that God had blessed them. They were exceptional and chosen, because they had the right religion and the right God. The proof was in their prosperity.

This bugged Amos more than anything else. Amos, speaking on behalf of the Lord said:

*“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. (5:21-24)*

This sermon is not about Martin Luther King.

This sermon is not about Amos either.

This sermon is about us.

It is about you and me.
It is about our conscience.

It is about wars and reasons for them.

Another 20,000 troops have been sent to Iraq.
Do we really know why?
Do we really want to ask why?

Can we handle the truth?

Can we allow the words of Amos to haunt us enough into reflection and action?

*Let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*