

**Let the River Flow**  
**Rev. Anita Peebles**  
**Scripture: Amos 5**  
**November 8, 2020**



Amos 5:18-24 (CEB)

*Doom to those who desire the day of the Lord!*

*Why do you want the day of the Lord?*

*It is darkness, not light;*

*as if someone fled from a lion,*

*and was met by a bear;*

*or sought refuge in a house,*

*rested a hand against the wall,*

*and was bitten by a snake.*

*Isn't the day of the Lord darkness, not light;*

*all dark with no brightness in it?*

*I hate, I reject your festivals;*

*I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies.*

*If you bring me your entirely burned offerings and gifts of food—*

*I won't be pleased;*

*I won't even look at your offerings of well-fed animals.*

*Take away the noise of your songs;*

*I won't listen to the melody of your harps.*

*But let justice roll down like waters,*

*and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Well, recording a worship service on Friday doesn't always work in times like this. As you are hearing my words on Sunday morning, or whenever you join your heart with the community to worship, you may know things that I don't know as I tape this now. You may know something that has not yet come to pass for me. There is a weirdness, a liminal nature to worship in the time of COVID as well as this week...this long, long, hard, hard week. There is still so much we don't know.

For the West Wing fans out there, I've been thinking about those episodes where the speech writers are asked if they are writing two speeches. And as I contemplated this week, trying ahead of time to prepare for a constellation of "what if"s, I thought about writing two sermons. But then I realized this, and this has been my handle on hope this week: our salvation has never been dependent on who was in the White House.

The task of people who follow the Way of Jesus is the same, whether Trump or Biden or Clinton or anyone holds the Presidency. And as such, I wrote only one sermon. And I'll begin this one the same way I began the sermon I preached after the 2016 election:

In the summer of 2016, I was fortunate to join with other Vanderbilt Divinity students and attend the Children's Defense Fund conference at the Alex Haley Farm in Clinton, TN. On the first day of the conference, Rev. Dr. Eileen Lindner, a civil rights veteran and a Presbyterian minister, led the seminarians gathered there in exploring theology and action. She asked us what she calls the EMT questions: the questions that Emergency Medical Technicians ask people who have just been in an accident to assess head trauma.

These questions are:

- Do you know who you are?
- Do you know where you are?
- Do you know what time it is?
- Do you know what just happened?

If a person responds correctly to all of these questions, they are considered "alert and conscious times 4." If they only respond to the first three questions, they are considered "alert and conscious times 3" and so on. Rev. Dr. Lindner told us that the first question, "Do you know who you are?" is the most important, because identity is the last thing to go in trauma situations. She also proposed that the utility of these questions does not end in a hospital setting, but that they can also be applied to prophetic ministry.

So let's check in with the prophet Amos, whose words we read as our Scripture text today:

Do you know who you are?

Amos is a shepherd from a rural village called Tekoa in Judah. He says "I am no prophet nor am I the disciple of a prophet. I was a shepherd who gathered figs for food. But YHWH took me from herding the flock and said, 'Go prophesy to my people.'" (Amos 7:14-15) And friends, this shouldn't sound strange to us, because isn't God in the business of calling those who are unexpected?

Do you know where you are?

The political geography of Amos' time matched the religious geography. The kingdom of Israel, which had been established under the rulership of David, was now divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called Israel and the southern kingdom was called Judah. Religious practice was also divided at this time, as the southern kingdom worshipped in the centralized temple in Jerusalem while the northern kingdom worshipped primarily at the ancient shrines, such as Bethel and Beersheba and Gilgal, ancient places where Jacob wrestled an angel and where Hagar named God and where Abram pitched his tent.

Do you know what time it is?

At the beginning of Amos' prophetic book, the date is given as being "during the time of Uzziah ruler of Judah and of Jeroboam ben-Joash, ruler of Israel, two years after the earthquake." By dating the prophecy this way, the prophet is located in a real place and real time, in the 8th century Before the Common Era, during a time of relative calm before the coming threat of the Assyrians, as we learned about in the Godly Play story this morning. Amos talks harshly about the "day of the LORD," which can be understood as the day of judgement, on a cosmic time-scale.

Do you know what just happened?

This is the tough question for a prophet. Because in some ways, the prophets are particularly attuned to what is going on in the world in their specific time and location. But also, prophets are seeing strategically, bringing warnings about what may come to pass if life continues “business as usual.”

Amos speaks harshly about what he sees going on in his lifetime: “You defraud the poor, steal from the needy, and call out ‘Bring me another drink!’” “You hate the arbiter who sits at the city gate, and detest the one who speaks the truth. Rest assured: since you trampled on the poor, extorting inhumane taxes on their grain, those houses you build of hewn stone--you will never live in them; and those precious vineyards you planted--you will never drink their wine. I have noted your many atrocities and your countless sins, you persecutors of the righteous, you bribe-takers, you who deny justice to the needy at the city gate!”

Womanist biblical scholar Wil Gafney says about Amos, “There is so much rage.”

And I can just imagine Amos speaking truth to power, uttering the discomfiting words God has given him to the leaders of the day, saying “Of course there is!”

Wil Gafney tells us why, from Amos’ perspective: “Those Israelites across the border should know better. They have turned so far away from God, seceding from the union, rejecting one king to rule over them because of a few [(indeed not so few) sexual and financial indiscretions]. They have even rejected the great innovation in worship, the centralized temple, going back to the old-fashioned shrines of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha instead. They are furthermore making allegiances with foreign nations, some of whom are in open conflict with the tiny realm of Judah.”

OF COURSE there is so much rage.

Sound familiar?

So let’s turn these EMT questions towards ourselves, to try to gain some clarity about our current situation, which is continuing to unfold politically:

Seattle First Baptist Church, do you know who you are?

Please join me in saying these words, which can be found on every bulletin and on our church website: “We are a community of faith united in exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus Christ, to be a people of God, and to love and care for our neighbors. As a church we will know no circles of exclusion, no boundaries we will not cross, and no loyalties above those which we owe to God.”

Not only this, but we have a legacy of “being on the right side of history.” And that is not always the popular, or profitable, or easy place to be. Actually, it is rarely any of those things. But we also have a heritage as Baptists who support the separation of church and state; who show up when our Muslim and Jewish neighbors are threatened; who call for climate-responsibility; who say Black Lives Matter; who feed those who live closest to the margins of this society. That’s who we are.

Do we know where we are?

We are in Seattle, on the ancestral land of the Duwamish and Coast Salish peoples. And if you’re not in Seattle, do you know on whose land you make your home and your worship? If you don’t, please try to find out. We are in Seattle, one of the top ten richest cities in the United States. 14 billionaires live in this state. We are generally thought of as a “progressive” city, though we are by no means perfect.

Do we know what time it is?

Well, though COVID time has almost become another way of marking the passage of

time, we do know that we are in the week after--or during--a presidential election which some call the "battle for the soul of our nation." And it's worth noting that the electors who directly pick the President are not meeting until December 14, just like every other election cycle. In this time that feels so strange to many of us, with anxious waiting, we know that projections are taking longer because every vote is being counted.

And do we know what just happened?

In a way, yes. We have numbers, data, to back up the tallies of the popular vote. We have a Constitution in this country that tells us how the electoral college works. So we can interpret the events of this past week from that point of view.

But, I'm also not sure many of us have grasped the meaning of what just happened...or is still happening...as votes continue to be counted on Friday evening...I'm not sure because I've heard a lot of people talking about "wanting all of this to be over" and wondering "when will we turn to reconciliation" and saying "we're all still neighbors" and consoling ourselves by saying "we'll make it through." I'm not sure if we really see what has been happening and continues to happen in this country because some are expressing shock over how about half of the country seems to still support a racist, misogynist, tantrum-throwing tyrant. Can we truly say "we'll make it through" if 232,000 Americans haven't made it through this presidency? Can we honestly say "we're all still neighbors" if what the neighbors are doing is willfully ignoring the person lying in the ditch and passing by on the other side of the road? Can we say deep down from our most authentic selves that "we just want this all to be over," when the terror of Black, Indigenous, People of Color and poor folks living in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society will never be over unless we make it so?

Rev. Canon Kelly Brown Douglas said this on Twitter on Wednesday: "If Biden wins this, don't forget how close this race is. Our country is at war with itself. This is a 21st-century version of the Civil War, the nation's white supremacist foundation vs a more inclusive future. The lost cause is still strong and standing its ground."

We are not so far removed from the life and times of the prophet Amos. Because, beloved church, there is so. Much. rage. And with Amos, let us say: Of course there is.

So what is the way forward, according to Amos, who recorded the detailed failings of a society that turned their backs on the most vulnerable among them and prophesied coming violence and destruction? It sure isn't comfortable! But as any prophet, Amos did his best to tell people what was happening around them, and what would happen in the future if they didn't tend to the gross inequality of their 8th century BCE society. Charles L. Aaron, Jr. writes that the words of the prophet Amos are intended for the worshipping community, the people who sang the songs and offered the sacrifices and prayed to God. These are not words meant to condemn the people who have turned away from the faith or the people who have no interest in religion. These are words for the insiders, for the community.

And reading it this way, I offer a word of caution: In referring to "church-going insiders," I am not talking about the white evangelicals who voted overwhelmingly for Trump. I am not talking about "those kinds" of Baptists with whom many of us disassociate ourselves. These words from this prophet are for us, too. The well-meaning liberals and the "good white people" and the intellectual Christians and the post-Christians.

Amos' words resonate in this time: "I despise and reject your feasts! I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies! When you offer me burnt offerings, I reject your oblations and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle! Spare me the racket of your chanting! Relieve me of the strumming of your harps!"

God doesn't want to hear our cries of shock at how deep the so-called democracy of this country is soaked in white supremacy. There should be no schadenfreude-filled shouts of joy at the electoral map that shows more blue than red, because many of us heard what Professor Eddie Glaude said on the morning of November 4: Hate, grievance and resentment are what motivated disaffected white voters. The story is not about the Black or Latinx voters whose choices surprised white people, and I quote Dr. Glaude: "this is a story about white America, this is a story about how whiteness animates the core of this country along with selfishness." The music pouring forth from victory celebrations as Nevada and Georgia and Pennsylvania lean blue must be tempered with the knowledge that the work, particularly for white people, is far, far from over because salvation is not coming through the Biden administration.

So away with our showy displays of faith...but show me where people do the real, hard, relational work of shifting single-issue voters to be voters who realize that the measure of this country is how well we care for the most vulnerable among us.

Away with the noisy songs...but show me where the cries of sorrow are turned into rejoicing with programs that reallocate money from racialized policing into community wellness.

Away with the solemn processions...but show me where the people dance in the streets in the face of right-wing intimidation and police brutality, because the powers and principalities don't know what to do with joy.

And away with the hand-wringing and the "we'll make it through" because 232,000 americans haven't made it through this presidency due to COVID and many more due to police brutality and we need to interrogate who the "we" is!

Amos reminds us that God's justice is coming. God is with the poor and oppressed and if our worship does not include action to change the material situations of those who live, as Howard Thurman says, with their backs up against the wall, then our worship offends God. We must decide whether we will be rocks forming a dam that stems that flow, or if we will be complicit in opening the floodgates so the cleansing water can come rushing through.

And so, dear ones, let us return to questions I've heard folks asking this week: How do we reach for unity? How do we approach reconciliation?

But let's not ask these questions because we are scared of people shouting or because we pursue a surface-level "peace,"...let us ask these questions knowing full well that there's a lot of work to do. And the work begins in centers of religious communities, with making sure we are not just paying lip service to the Way of Jesus we say we follow. And the work begins by following the lead of incredible Black, Indigenous and People of Color leaders like Stacy Abrams, who pushed to register more than 800,000 voters in the voter-suppressed state of Georgia; and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, who inspires fear in many right-wing leaders but also in the Democratic establishment because of her support for a planet which supports the thriving of low-income communities of color; and each of the organizers of color who hit the pavement everyday knocking doors and building relationships and witnessing for policies that promote community thriving from the bottom-up rather than waiting for wellness to trickle-down.

My people, how are we going to respond to God's justice? At times, particularly over the last 4 years, or 400 years, it may seem stuck in the snow at the top of Mount Tahoma, but surely the spring comes and the snow melt begins and it turns into a tiny, seemingly-insignificant stream, and then that stream merges with others and becomes a crashing river and a rolling, tumbling, roiling cascade. Sometimes there are things that need to melt away to let the river run, but the deep truth is that the small details of how each of us live and work and worship add up as we hold accountable systems that serve us, as we play our part and remind the world

around us that the USA is not God and each of us are not God but we can all be those tiny trickles that merge into a cascading river that floods the world with goodness. So let's make sure we are not rocks that form a dam that stems the flow; let's make sure we are not standing in the way of justice with our hand-wringing and critiques of proper protest. Let's make sure we act as the pebbles at the bottom of the stream, let us give ourselves over to the stream of justice and let our rough edges be smoothed and let us show the water the simplest path it can take towards its goal. Help it happen. Make it possible. Make it overwhelming, your support for God's good gifts of justice and righteousness that will be ever-flowing toward a parched land in need of sustaining love. Be brave enough to let yourself be transformed by the rolling waters of God's righteousness.

Beloveds, are you awake and alert times 4? Are we as a church? What are you going to do to keep alert, and keep others' around you alert, since now folks seem to be waking up and following the flow?

May it ever be so.

## Benediction

- "V'ahavta" by Aurora Levins Morales

"Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,  
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning  
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,  
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,  
teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies,  
recite them in your sleep, here in the cruel shadow of empire:  
Another world is possible.

Thus spoke the prophet Roque Dalton:

All together they have more death than we,  
but all together, we have more life than they.

There is more bloody death in their hands  
than we could ever wield, unless

we lay down our souls to become them,  
and then we will lose everything. So instead,  
imagine winning. This is your sacred task.

This is your power. Imagine

every detail of winning, the exact smell of the summer streets  
in which no one has been shot, the muscles you have never  
unclenched from worry, gone soft as newborn skin,  
the sparkling taste of food when we know  
that no one on earth is hungry, that the beggars are fed,  
that the old man under the bridge and the woman  
wrapping herself in thin sheets in the back seat of a car,  
and the children who suck on stones,

nest under a flock of roofs that keep multiplying their shelter.  
Lean with all your being towards that day  
when the poor of the world shake down a rain of good fortune  
out of the heavy clouds, and justice rolls down like waters.  
Defend the world in which we win as if it were your child.  
It is your child.  
Defend it as if it were your lover.  
It is your lover.  
When you inhale and when you exhale  
breathe the possibility of another world  
into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body  
until it shines with hope.  
Then imagine more.  
Imagine rape is unimaginable. Imagine war is a scarcely credible rumor,  
That the crimes of our age, the grotesque inhumanities of greed,  
the sheer and astounding shamelessness of it, the vast fortunes  
made by stealing lives, the horrible normalcy it came to have,  
is unimaginable to our heirs, the generations of the free.  
Don't waver. Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth  
Into the throat with which you sing. Escalate your dreams.  
Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down  
any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way.  
Make them burn clear as a starry drinking gourd  
Over the grim fog of exhaustion, and keep walking.  
Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining.  
So that we, and the children of our children's children  
may live."