

Let Justice Roll

The Lion's Roar: Listening to the Book of Amos

Amos 5-6

Pastor Josh Black

September 2, 2018

I'm not dead yet.

In 2012, a Brazilian man named Gilberto Araujo showed up to his mom's house and found a bunch of people there. There was actually a funeral going on. What he didn't realize at first was it was his own funeral! Can you imagine his astonishment? Maybe he quoted a line from Monty Python: "But I'm not dead yet."

It turned out that Gilberto worked with a man who looked just like him. That man had been killed. But Gilberto's brother identified the dead body as Gilberto's body. The body was sent to his mother's house and now they were having a funeral. There was weeping and wailing as the guests looked at the body. People were wearing black. And they were sharing their memories of Gilberto.¹ At least until he showed up!

Put yourself in Gilberto's shoes. What would it be like to show up to your own funeral? And to listen to people describe what happened to you. And to talk about your life. What effect would that have on you? Would it change the way you lived?

That's what's going on in Amos 5-6. It is a funeral dirge. It has all the marks of an ancient funeral lament.² So when Amos starts singing the funeral song, they would've said, "Who died?" They would've been shocked to learn that they were listening in on their own funeral. They weren't dead yet. In fact, they were doing quite well, living in good health and with quite a lot of wealth.³

As bizarre as this may seem, there was a reason for all of it. God wanted them to respond as they listened in on their own funeral, as they heard God weeping, as they heard about what happened to cause their death. They would've had an opportunity to change the course of history. They could seek God and live. They could avoid dying if they would just repent.

Amos 5:1-17⁴

^{5:1}*Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:*

²*"Fallen, no more to rise,
is the virgin Israel;
forsaken on her land,
with none to raise her up."*

¹ 11 People Who Turned Up Alive at Their Own Funeral, Mentalfloss.com

² Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary

³ R. Reed Lessing, "Upsetting the Status Quo: Preaching Like Amos," *Concordia Journal*, July 2007

⁴ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

³For thus says the Lord GOD:

*“The city that went out a thousand
shall have a hundred left,
and that which went out a hundred
shall have ten left
to the house of Israel.”*

⁴For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel:

*“Seek me and live;
⁵but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beersheba;
for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
and Bethel shall come to nothing.”*

⁶Seek the LORD and live,
lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph,
and it devour, with none to quench it for Bethel,

⁷O you who turn justice to wormwood
and cast down righteousness to the earth!

⁸He who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea
and pours them out on the surface of the earth,
the LORD is his name;

⁹who makes destruction flash forth against the strong,
so that destruction comes upon the fortress.

¹⁰They hate him who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor him who speaks the truth.

¹¹Therefore because you trample on the poor
and you exact taxes of grain from him,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.

¹²For I know how many are your transgressions
and how great are your sins—
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and turn aside the needy in the gate.

¹³Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time,
for it is an evil time.

¹⁴Seek good, and not evil,
that you may live;

*and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you
as you have said.*

¹⁵*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.*

¹⁶*Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord:*

*“In all the squares there shall be wailing,
and in all the streets they shall say, ‘Alas! Alas!’
They shall call the farmers to mourning
and to wailing those who are skilled in lamentation,
¹⁷and in all vineyards there shall be wailing,
for I will pass through your midst,”*

says the LORD.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Clearly there’s a lot of weeping at this funeral. God is weeping (v. 1). The people are wailing (vv. 16-17). But why’s God weeping at Israel’s funeral? And how should they respond? Those are the questions we’re going to answer this morning.

It was typical at an ancient funeral to give a description of the tragedy that led to death. But it was also normal to call the people at the funeral to respond.⁵

I’m not going to walk through the passage sequentially. I’m simply going to answer two questions: why all the weeping and how should we respond? The basic reason God was weeping was because of Israel’s sin and the judgment that was coming on them. And the basic response is for them to repent. But the way these things come out in the passage is through irony. There are three ironic words in this passage: turn, hate, and seek. The first two teach us about Israel’s sin and God’s judgment. The third teaches us about the need to repent.

TURN

The first word is “turn.” It’s used three times. The first two times describe Israel’s injustice. In 5:7 we read, “O you who turn justice to wormwood and cast down righteousness to the earth.” We see the same thing in 6:12, “You have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.”

The third use comes at the heart of the passage.⁶ It describes God’s judgment. In 5:8 it says, “He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day into night...the LORD is his name.”

We can summarize the use of the word “turn” this way. Israel turns justice into bitterness (5:7; 6:12). Therefore, God will turn day into night, life into death (5:8, 18-20).

⁵ Stuart

⁶ According to B.K. Smith this may be the heart of the whole book. It’s at the center of a chiasm in 5:1-17.
Billy K. Smith, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*. New American Commentary

Turning Justice Into Bitterness

What does all of this mean? The title of this sermon is “Let Justice Roll.” That comes from 5:24. God says, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Justice was *supposed* to roll down like waters. It was *supposed* to be delightful and refreshing. But it had become like wormwood. It had become bitter.

Justice was bitter to the rich and powerful because they *didn't* want justice. They wanted to take advantage of the poor and the weak. Justice was bitter to the poor and the weak because they *wanted* justice, but they weren't getting it. And so often that's the way injustice rolls. It rolls in favor of the rich and the powerful. And it rolls against the poor and the weak.

Right now I'm reading a book called *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. He talks about injustice in the legal system. He describes many people who've been wrongfully convicted of crimes and then put to death. It's a great book. I'd encourage you to read it. Actually, he's giving a public lecture at WSU on September 20. In the beginning of his book he quotes someone who defines capital punishment like this: “Them without the capital get the punishment.” Regardless of what you think of that comment, I think it's generally true that those who are poor are more prone to suffer injustice.

That's the way it was in Amos' day. Justice was bitter for the poor, because they couldn't get any justice.

You don't have to be a cultural analyst to know that there's still racial tension in our country, mainly between whites and blacks. And one of the things I hear regularly among white folks is something like this. “I don't understand the problem. Aren't we past all of that? Can't we just move on?” I know I've said something like that before. But over the last few years I've been trying to understand more. I've been reading. I've been talking with my black friends. And I've come to see that it's a lot easier for white folks to say “Can't we just move on,” because we don't actually know what it's like to live in the shoes of our African American brothers and sisters. Especially when it comes to African American attitudes toward the justice system. For many of them the justice system turned bitter long ago. And it's still bitter.

But should we be surprised that justice has become bitter for many African Americans in our country? What would your attitude toward justice be if your people had been the victims of systematic injustice for centuries? Think about it. America has been turning justice into wormwood since the seventeenth century.

Paul Nyquist is the president of Moody Global Ministries. In his book, *Is Justice Possible?* he traces the unjust laws against African Americans throughout our history.⁷ There was the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850. Plessy vs. Ferguson of 1896 which legalized segregation. And the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 that made interracial marriage illegal. All of those laws were clearly unjust!

And in our own day, we've had drug laws which have often been tougher on drugs like crack cocaine (that's used in poor urban areas) than powder cocaine (that's used in more affluent suburban areas). This in turn has led to mass incarceration and increased poverty in black communities.⁸

⁷ J. Paul Nyquist, *Is Justice Possible?*, 43-46

⁸ See the documentary, “[131H](#)”

I'm not suggesting that all of the problems in black communities are because of unjust laws. I'm just saying that over time the cumulative effect of unjust laws that disadvantage African Americans will have a negative effect. It will leave a bitter taste in your mouth for the justice system. And I'm trying to let you see that the problems we face in our day are not altogether different from the ones Israel was up against.

In Israel, justice was bitter to the rich and powerful. They didn't want justice; they wanted exploitation. And it was bitter to the poor and weak. They wanted justice, but didn't get any. That's the way justice rolled in Israel—not like sweet water, but like bitter wormwood. And that's why God was weeping.

Turning Day Into Night

Israel had turned justice into bitterness. But God can't tolerate injustice. So he reminded them that he was the God who could turn their day into night, their light into darkness. Israel was alive and well, but God was about to turn their life into death. He was about to punish them. They would be destroyed and sent into exile.

When you're disciplining one of your kids, have you ever said to them, "This hurts me more than you?" I think that's what's going on with God. He has to punish Israel. But their need for judgment causes him to weep.

Israel had a double standard when it came to the nations. The nations lived like hell and so Israel wanted God to bring judgment to them. Israel desired the day of the LORD, as verse 18 says. The day of the Lord was the day God would come to bring judgment. But Israel failed to see that *they* would experience God's judgment too, not just the nations.

Look at verses 18-20, "Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?"

Israel wanted the nations' funeral to come quickly. But God said, you'll see your funeral before you see theirs. They'd turned justice into bitterness, so God was going to turn their life into death.

HATE

Let's look now at the second ironic word in Amos 5-6. The word "hate." This word shows up four times. The first describes Israel's injustice again. Look at 5:10. "They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth."

The last two times, the word "hate" refers to God's coming judgment. Look at 5:21, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." Look at 6:8, "I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it."

The ironic use of the word "hate" can be summarized like this. Israel hates justice (5:10-12). God hates Israel's praise and pride, devoid of justice (5:21-24; 6:1-8).

Israel hates justice.

What's going on here? Well, the theme of injustice continues. But it gets more specific. The scene in verse 10 is the courtroom. In ancient Israel the elders of the city would sit at the city gate and serve as judges in legal matters. So the gate is the ancient courtroom. But Israel hates him who reproves in the gate. That is, they hate the poor man who brings a case against a rich man. They won't listen to him, because they abhor him who speaks the truth. Those who hate justice would rather deal in lies and injustice than in truth and righteousness.

Why is that? Because the rich and powerful wanted to maintain their wealth and power. They wanted to live in their houses of stone. They wanted to drink from their pleasant vineyards. And one way they did that was through exploiting the poor.

Look at verse 11, "You trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him." As I read a commentary on this verse I learned that it is referring to an ancient version of sharecropping, very similar to the system we had in south following the Civil War.

In John Perkin's wonderful book, *Let Justice Roll*, he describes what it was like for his family to live as sharecroppers in Mississippi in the thirties and forties. Landowners would lend sharecroppers money to live on. Depending on the size of the farm it may be something like eight dollars per month for the whole family to live on. But the landowners would lend the money at astronomical interest rates, up to 25 percent. When harvest came, the landowner would get 50 percent of the cotton. The sharecropper would get the other 50 percent of the cotton. But then they would have to hand over their portion of the harvest to pay off their debt. It was a no-win situation that left sharecroppers destitute and completely at the mercy of the landowners.

Something like that's going on in Amos 5. Not only are the poor staying poor. But they have no recourse. If the landowner cheated them and they took them to court, they couldn't make any progress. Even if the sharecropper was in the right, or righteous as verse 12 says, they weren't getting a fair hearing. The judges were taking bribes from the landowners. And so the needy were turned aside from the gate.

God hates Israel's praise and pride.

So Israel hates justice. But God hates Israel's praise and pride that's devoid of justice. It causes him to weep. In verse 21 God says, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." What he's referring to here is their worship.

God is speaking to people who are very wealthy (cf. 6:1-8), people who have taken great pride in their wealth. They are self-sufficient and they are self-indulgent. These wealthy people were all about going to church. They brought their offerings too. Burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings. And they like to get their praise on. But God says "take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen."

It's like God was saying, "I'm going to unplug your amps. I'm going to smash your guitars and throw your mic stands across the stage." Or, "I'm going to burn your organ." "I'm going to black out your projector screen and send your hymnals to the paper shredder."

Why doesn't God like their worship? Were they getting too contemporary for him? I don't think so. The reason God didn't like their worship is because God can't stand worship in a worship service

that's not matched up with worship in everyday service to him. That's why he says in verse 24, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Isaiah 1:11, 17 says it this way. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats...learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widows cause."

God doesn't want Sunday-only believers who leave him behind on Monday morning. God doesn't want those who praise him at church and then step on the weak at work. God doesn't want those who give a lot of money to be seen by people, but who actually lack a generous heart. God doesn't want people who simply worship him with their *lips*. He wants their *lives*.

Israel hated justice. God hated their praise and pride that was devoid of justice. That's why he's weeping. That's what breaks his heart. And he wants it to break their hearts as well.

SEEK

Remember Israel is listening in on their own funeral service. But the point of it all was so they would repent and live. God wanted them to respond.

So let's turn now to the response portion of this funeral dirge. How could Israel avoid death? The key word in this section is "seek." In verses 4, 6 God says, "Seek me and live." But then in verse 14 he says, "Seek good, and not evil that you may live." So seeking God is seeking good. He goes on in verse 15 to say what that means, "Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate." This teaches us that seeking God is seeking justice.

This is similar to the point we just made. To worship God truly involves not just our words, but our actions as well. In a similar way, to seek God is to seek the good of others. To seek God is to seek justice. To love God is to love justice, not hate it!

But what does it mean to seek justice. We've talked a lot about justice this morning, or at least we've talked about injustice. But we haven't really defined justice. What does the Bible mean by justice?

After reading a number of descriptions of justice in the Bible and in other sources, I'd say that justice can be simplified this way: Doing right and righting wrong without partiality in our relationships with others.

In Tim Keller's book, *Generous Justice*, he uses Job as an example of both doing right and righting wrong. In Job 29, Job describes himself as putting on righteousness and justice.

Righteousness and justice are really a part of the same package. So many people think of righteousness as our private morality—our purity, prayer, Bible reading, etc. But the Bible never views righteousness in a private way. Righteousness and justice are always relational. They're always social.⁹

And so Job's righteousness and justice involved actions toward other people, both people he knew and people he didn't know. It involved doing right and righting wrong without partiality.

⁹ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice*

M.A. Seifrid, "Righteousness, Justice and Justification," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*

Job 29:12-17

¹²*I delivered the poor who cried for help,
and the fatherless who had none to help him.*
¹³*The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me,
and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.*
¹⁴*I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
my justice was like a robe and a turban.*
¹⁵*I was eyes to the blind
and feet to the lame.*
¹⁶*I was a father to the needy,
and I searched out the cause of him who I did not know.*
¹⁷*I broke the fangs of the unrighteous
and made him drop his prey from his teeth.*

Clearly Job was involved in doing right. “He cared for the needs of the poor as a parent would care for the needs of his children.”¹⁰

In our day, this could involve a number of things I see people in this church doing: Serving at the Union Rescue Mission, counseling women in crisis at Choices Medical Clinic, taking in foster kids, visiting shut-ins, or helping out at one of the public schools.

Job did right. And he was also involved in righting wrongs. He took up the cause of the immigrant, those he did not know. And he confronted those who exploited the vulnerable, “he broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth.”¹¹

Tim Keller says that in our day, this could involve prosecuting the men who batter and exploit women. It could also involve contributing to organizations like the Innocence Project. Brandon told me about this organization. Many people who are convicted of crimes they didn't commit are so poor they can't afford good legal counsel. But there are organizations that try to help these people with a fair trial.

Job was righteous and just. He did right and he righted wrong. And he did this *without partiality*. So often justice is *not* served because we show partiality. The rich and the strong take advantage of the vulnerable. That's why the Bible often emphasizes taking up the cause of, and caring for, the weak. Zechariah 7:9-10 says, “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor.’” (NIV)

So that's what justice is. But why does God call his people to seek righteousness and justice for the weak? Because God himself is righteous and executes justice toward the weak. God does right and rights wrongs.

Psalm 146:7-9

⁷*[He] executes justice for the oppressed,
[he] gives food to the hungry.*
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
⁸*the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.*

¹⁰ Keller, 13

¹¹ Keller, 12

*The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the sojourners;
he upholds the widow and the fatherless,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

That's why Amos says that when we seek God we will also seek justice. God himself seeks justice. So it only makes sense that we too would seek justice if we're going to seek God.

Many people in the evangelical church have an aversion to social justice. We tend to equate a call for justice with liberalism—either liberal theology or liberal politics. We know that throughout history many people who have been advocates for social justice have compromised on their theology. They've abandoned the gospel of salvation for the social gospel. As a result, many today have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. In an effort to stay true to the gospel, we don't engage in social justice.

But we need to beware of pendulum swings. As Brandon Redic says to me all the time, being an advocate for social justice is not a matter of being liberal or conservative. It's a matter of being biblical. And it's extremely gospel-centered.

In fact, I would say that if we truly understand the gospel it will inevitably lead us to do right and to right wrongs without partiality. Jesus himself did right. He lived a perfect life. He never sinned against anyone. And he righted wrongs. The supreme example is the cross. There the justice and mercy of God kissed. Jesus fulfilled God's righteous demands for justice in dying in the place of sinners like you and me. And even though we, like Israel, deserve God's judgment and justice, instead we can have mercy through the cross.

Do you grasp the depths of God's grace for you? He has shown you, a poor and weak sinner, justice and mercy. And "there's a direct relationship between your grasp and experience of God's grace and your heart for justice..."¹²

¹² Keller, xix.