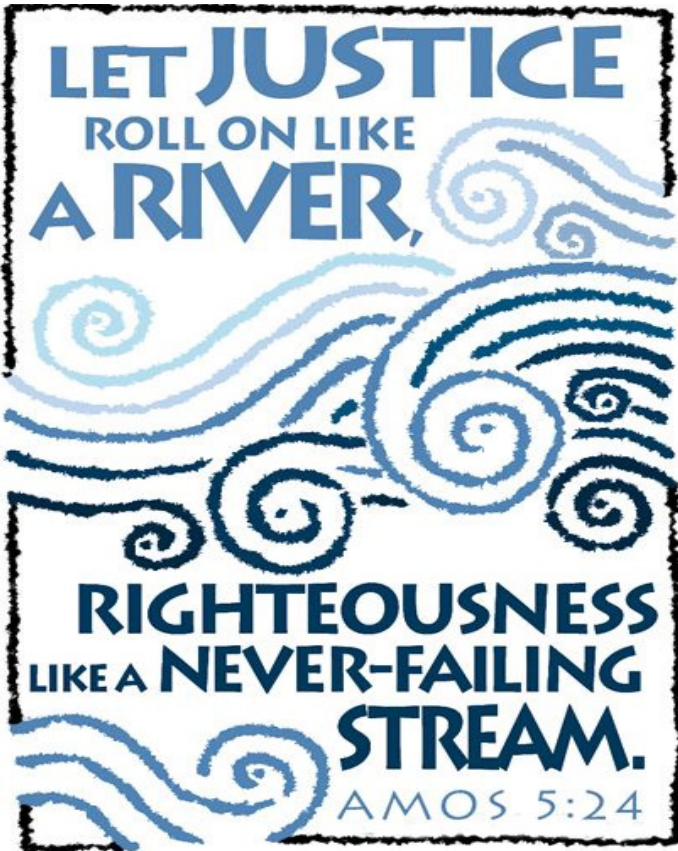


November 12, 2023

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday of Pentecost

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Amos 5:18-24



For some this might be joyous news, for others perhaps less so, but whatever your personal take on the holidays, it's just a fact that there are only 42 days left until Christmas. Maybe you already know this: you've been ticking off the days since Labor Day, already have gone through multiple drafts of your gift list, can hardly wait until it is socially appropriate to fill your home with Christmas music and fake evergreen scent, to hang your stockings, put up the tree, and begin baking cookies for Santa.

On the other hand, maybe you are on the other side of the spectrum: for any number of possible reasons, the holidays are not a joyous time for you, but rather a gloomy one—a season with lots of gray skies and heavy hearts.

Whatever your personal feelings towards this time of year, as we head into the holiday season—the season of festivals—the words of Amos the prophet are crucially important to bear in mind.

The festivals—Thanksgiving, Christmas, even New Year's—do not exist for us, for our own benefit—contrary to what every single advertisement tries to persuade us to believe. These holidays, especially the most sacred one of Christmas, are, like the holidays and festivals of Amos' day, meant for worshipping God. Yet God, in the passage we just read from Amos, is disgusted by these spiritual celebrations so much so that God explicitly informs the Israelites that God "hates" their holiday parties. Why is this? Why is God so upset? The answer is pretty apparent: the Jews of Amos' day have lost sight of what the festivals are all about: they eat and drink, they have a great time, maybe they even exchange some gifts, and in the midst of their merriment, they say "oh yeah, God, out of the generosity of our hearts we're gonna give you some special holiday stuff too," and they fill the Temple with the rich aroma of different kinds of sacrifices.

But God, to the people's great surprise, rejects their holiday gifts: "I don't want these sacrifices, these offerings," God says, "what are you doing? You're partying in oblivious merriment while the poor starve around you."

Holiday celebrations, in other words, are ultimately meaningless if approached only with an eye to ourselves, to our enjoyment, with at most a passing glance towards God. Amos knew this and, channeling the voice of God, prophetically and poetically cried out against holiday hypocrisy: celebrating special religious days without caring for one's neighbor, making grandiose

holiday offerings without feeding the poor right outside one's door: "I don't want your burnt offerings," God remarks through Amos. "If you really want to worship me, act with justice and righteousness: care for the poor, don't hoard your wealth, don't turn a blind eye to those in distress, to those who are vulnerable and oppressed."

In 1991 the famous, Nobel-prize winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney gave an interview in which he identified the role that he saw poets playing in the world, in society, and I think his comments about the role of the poet applies very well also to that of the prophet. Heaney remarks that: "The poet is on the side of undeceiving the world... tr[ying] to help [each of] us to be a truer, purer, wholer being." "Undeceiving" the world...what a potent phrase... The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann helps us understand what this phrase might mean in terms of figures like Amos when he writes that: "The prophets in ancient Israel lived in a deceiving [and] deceived society...[T]o be deceived meant to be ... seduced into a make-believe world that was contrary to the realities of human life and contrary to that holy intentionality that permeates all of life. But to be undeceived," continues Brueggemann, "means to be brought face to face with the realities of human life ... and with the reality of holy intentionality..." In other words, the prophets of ancient Israel, just like good poetry as defined by Seamus Heaney, crafted their words to help people wake up: to stop living deceived, to stop living in a make-believe world, and instead to face squarely two overwhelming realities: on the one hand, to face the fact that there is a lot of pain in human life—suffering, injustice, oppression, poverty. And simultaneously, on the other hand, these same prophets continually reminded their audience of the presence of the Holy permeating this world and this life, despite—and sometimes even through—the clear-eyed acknowledgment of life's pain and injustice.

We too lived in a "deceived and deceiving" society: while the reign of "alternative facts" offers a glaring recent example, our country's deception is not restricted only to the post-Truth era. For many generations, even back to the founding of the Colonies, we have willingly deceived ourselves and others in a sordid history stretching from the stealing of native land to the endless perpetuation of the false myth that America offers "equal opportunity" regardless of one's gender, race, wealth, and so on. Dozens of deceptions characterize American society, and for this

reason, we need the help of prophets and poets to “undeceive” us, to help us pull the wool back from our eyes, or even just to help us realize that the wool is there.

What is our make-believe world? What is the “make-believe” world of 2023 Lincoln, MA, the false reality that God’s prophets would puncture—ancient figures like Amos and contemporary ones like Dr. King, prophets with a divine and piercing perception who reveal to us the falsehoods baked into our society, the hypocrisies hamstringing even our most joyful holiday celebrations? Where might we, following Seamus Heaney, need to heed the prophets’ critiques in order to “undeceive” ourselves, in order to pull the blinders off our eyes, to see more clearly both the true state of our world and also the presence of the Holy within it?

Both of these aspects of the prophet’s message are crucially important: just hearing the prophet’s critique of our world can leave us feeling hopeless, deflated, overwhelmed, and powerless. But, thankfully, the prophet’s calling to “undeceive” the world entails not only pointing out injustice and hypocrisy but also revealing a path forward, illuminating where God is at work, where God’s holy Presence surges, often under the surface, renewing our inner hope and assuring us that, ultimately, all will be made well. The prophets not only “undeceive” us by laying plain the hard truths of our society and world, but they also “undeceive” those parts of us that tend towards gloom and despair by inviting us to join in the work that God is already doing, in whatever ways we personally are called, gifted, and energized, to continue repairing this world, this society, this community, guided and inspired by God’s values of justice and righteousness.

So, as we soon celebrate Thanksgiving and count down the next 40-some days until Christmas: sure, go ahead, buy the turkey, prepare the eggnog, put up the tinsel, hang the mistletoe, but may we never reduce the holidays to these shallow trappings. The true state of our world demands so much more. As we begin moving towards the sacred celebrations, may we keep Amos’ words foremost in our minds: Amos’ prophetic critique of empty holiday merrymaking, Amos’ sharp reminder that the festive celebrations which God actually finds pleasing are those that join in the work God is already doing to aid the poor, to rectify the imbalance between powerful and vulnerable, to advance the causes of justice and righteousness in Lincoln, in America, and in our world. Amen.