

## XXIII Sunday after Pentecost

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church

November 8, 2020

Proper 27A

Deacon Dennis Taylor, RN

We respectfully acknowledge that we are on the traditional land of the Coastal Salish People; the Skagit, Upper Skagit and Swinomish peoples.

14 Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, <sup>15</sup>and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel." (Amos 7:14). Amos is not a professional nor is he descended from prophets or priests, but claims that God called him from Judah, the Southern Kingdom, around 760 BC, to prophesy to Jeroboam II and the people of Israel, the Northern Kingdom.

At this time Israel is expanding its kingdom and Judah is a vassal and Amos comes preaching doom and gloom because Israel, along with several other kingdoms around the area, has fallen short of their vocation in creation. Amos doesn't get to deliver his message to Jeroboam and Bethel and is forced to return to Judah by the head priest Amaziah. His prophecies are the earliest known written prophecies we have. He is working to fulfill his call by writing them down where he cannot preach them. About 720 BC the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire and the ten tribes were sent into exile.

Why is God sending Amos north with such a dire message? "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps." (Amos 5: 21.23)

What has Israel done to be subject to such degradation and destruction? Their worship seemed to be proper. Is it Israel's failure to live up to their vocation to be stewards and tenders of creation? If worship is one of the prime purposes for God's creation for human beings, why is there no Temple in Eden or signs of worship in either of the creation stories? Genesis 1:26-31 instructs humankind on stewardship and flourishing and Genesis 2:5,15-17 points to cultivating, protecting and enjoying creation. There are no call for any

conventional liturgical work to be done in praise of God. There are no rubrics. There are no practices required that would make God an object or end in either creation story. We are created and instructed to steward and tend creation. We are not to tend God. That is not what God needs from humanity. Worship of God is not the prime directive.

When one looks at what the relationship between God and the creations is in Genesis there is a very intimate relation. We are formed in God's own image from a handful of earth and the vital communion of the ruach, the spirit, the very breath of God. God even walked in the garden, assumingly with Adam and Eve, in the cool of the evening but they discovered they are naked. Humans were radically with God in creation, never to confront God in their work.

In this view as The Rev. Dr. Armand Larive puts it in his book, *After Sunday: A Theology of Work*, humans are created co-creators and God is the subject of human action. God is an intimate companion working with, in and through humanity within creation. Works we attempt ourselves are self-defeating and over and against God, a departure from the original relationship between creator and creature.

The Biblical writers are very keen on including texts that should guard against the chief hazards of religious life, especially Christian: works righteousness, triumphalism, literalism and spiritual pride to name a few.

It is interesting that the first worship service also occurs in Genesis, shortly after the expulsion from the garden. Genesis calls it a minchah, Hebrew for offering or present that Cain and Abel offer to God. When God shows "regard" for Abel's offering and not for Cain's the response is anger and followed by violence. Cain in his offering is bidding for divine acceptance and favor, a quid quo pro. The first worship story in scripture also becomes the first murder story.

Cain presupposes that his calling is to win divine favor by way of apparent generosity and reverent acts of worship. This is not the vocation that was called for. God then calls on Cain to repent, to return or reorient himself to the original vocation, stewarding and

enjoying the creation. As Cain lives out that call, he is assured that he, Cain, is accepted already and there is no need for liturgical negotiations.

Many of the Biblical prophets, from Isaiah to Jesus and Paul have picked up on this theme of worship and negotiation instead of stewardship and care and joy of creation. Dr. Martin Luther King in his letter from the Birmingham Jail in 1963

“We are moving toward the close of the 20th century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo—a taillight behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.” Our reading from Amos today “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” (Amos 5:21-22) which ends with that rousing cry for justice “But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” (5:24). By the way the Hebrew word for water the author uses is mayim from Genesis 1 and are the waters that God swept over first (Gen1:2) the very foundation for creation.

The best know verse from Micah, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8) which is preceded by another polemic about worship vs vocation; “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” (Mic. 6:7)

In Luke 22:16-20 Jesus institutes the first communion and speaks of remembrance and covenant and in verse 24 Matthew tells us “A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.” Humans rapidly fall into old ways of doing things or as Paul in Romans: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

Being the humans that we are we find ways to skirt around these admonishments, we don't sacrifice rams, we point at Pharisees, Sadducees, Jews, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans or anyone one else different from us. The texts are uncompromising: God's rejection is not based on a particular injustice or failure to live into the covenant. The prophets make it very clear that God says no to supposedly right worship and yes to

genuinely right living. Jesus quotes Hosea (6:6) quoting God in Matthew(9:13) “I desire mercy, not sacrifice”

The grace that recuses our worship from our minchah with its self-interested actions as the bottomline is God’s continued love and delight in humankind. Fr. Dale Johnson tells of a woman who came to see him for pastoral counseling. She was weeping, and not a member of his congregation but from a more fundamentalist church where the Bible is believed to be literally true and without error. Of course this is just another way of saying “believe the Bible the way I do.” She had been told by her pastor that her son, who had recently died, was in hell because he did not accept Jesus as his personal savior. She told the pastor “then I want to be in hell too.”

Touched by the depth of love this mother had for her son. Fr. Dale said to her “You have a profound depth of love for your son, from where do you think this love comes? Do you have more love than God?” Fr. Dale goes on that the woman hugged him and stated that that one statement had restored her faith. He also fully admits that statement was not his wisdom but that he was drawing on the cool waters of all wisdom, who graciously appears in our path, whom this woman understood as God and the source of her love for her son.”

Quoting Dr King; “Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.”

Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann argues that Christendom “has most disastrously drawn the spurious line between sacred and profane, in effect desecrating creation by setting apart allegedly holy spaces and holy days. The line is spurious because in truth the whole world is holy, and at last “God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).”

There is no Temple in Eden nor is there one in the New Jerusalem of Revelation. All creation is a temple, all life is sacred and all life is worship. “The key question is whether ours will be the liturgy of Cain, that anxious bargaining for divine favor, that giving-in-order-to-receive that leads to violence and death, or whether, by the grace of God, it will

also become the liturgy of Jesus Christ, that tender transformation of our anxious work into its beautiful, fully human reversal: the receiving-in-order-to-give that leads to restoration and new life.”

The Good News is that God will not abandon humankind as we charge down the road doing our own thing and telling God what has to be done God will join us there and with gentleness bring us home. We have to be open and willing to empty ourselves and to respond to the call of stewardship, cultivating, tending and protecting all creation as we are called to do.

Letter from Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King, Jr. June 12, 1963

Matthew Myer Boulton; Unholy rites: What's wrong with worship The Christian Century  
January 27, 2009

The Rev. Dr. Dale A. Johnson Face Book Blog, Theology; Why God does not Believe the Bible