

Lent I

The prophet Amos was born in Tekoa, the town in Judah, southern Israel, not the one in North Georgia.

He tells us in his book that he was not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet.

Rather he was herder of sheep and worker of sycamore trees.

He was a contemporary of Hosea and Isaiah, in the middle of the eight century BC.

He wrote in a time of prosperity but also of uneasy peace and neglect of the Law of God.

He saw disparity of well-being and wealth arising among the people.

And he told Israel to expect judgment.

He was bold enough to travel to Samaria, capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel.

To prophesy against the king, and even to enter into the royal shrine at Bethel,

and prophesy against the priest Amaziah and against the altar set up there.

He said something like these words, speaking the Word of God, taking the voice of God, remembered in his book:

*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.*

That isn't one of the appointed texts today, but I felt driven to it, by the arrival of Lent and another round of American violence this week.

What might he say among us today?

*I hate, I despise your Great Litany and Penitential Order
I take no delight in your Ash Wednesday and your Lent.
Even though you offer me your Holy Eucharist,
I will not accept it.
The offerings of your money and work I will not look upon.
Take away from me your lovely choir,
I will not listen to your terrible old organ or your nice new one.
But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

The Word of God in Amos is that worship, beautiful and moving as it may be to us, is not pleasing to God, if it is a thin veneer laid over sin and violence.

Indeed, lovely worship laid over injustice and bloodshed is an abomination;
a provocation to the living God.

I was pained, by Thursday afternoon, by my own priestly malpractice of Ash Wednesday.
Back in January, we had added a week to our capital campaign period.
We thought we needed a little more time and knew last weekend
would be busy with our Mardi Gras party.

That meant celebrating the end of the campaign today, on the First Sunday in Lent,
a little strange, but even Sundays in Lent are feast days of the Resurrection.

Still it made for a busy week, calling and emailing and trying to make sure we met our goal,
and preaching Wednesday and working with the Altar Guild

to make some Lenten changes to our worship,

So much so that I paid little attention to the news updates that came across the screen of my
phone,

Of another shooting, in a another school, in another devastated community.

And so I led worship that night with no mention of it,

no prayer about it,

no sense of the violence and terrible injustice of the day.

And I preached a sermon unworthy of the day.

Even as I began to plan for peaching today, I wanted to move toward the Psalm text, to happy
words that said:

*7 Gracious and upright is the Lord; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.*

*8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.*

*9 All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness *
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.*

But now does not seem the time for such happy talk.

But rather for another recognition that we live in a time of national brokenness,
much like the days Amos spoke of about.

When wealth increases but holiness and love do not.

We dwell in a wilderness like the one Jesus dwelled in but we seem unable to hear the angels of
God or the better angels of our nature calling us out of it.

Clearly we don't all agree on the way out of the wilderness;

it has been a long time since we gathered here and preached and prayed about Sandy Hook
and how many times since, and how many of them have I ignored.

But the prophets are clear that a happy, aesthetically pleasing religion than functions as a denial
of our sin and violence is not an option.

And the Lord Jesus, his flesh torn by human violence, calls from the cross to demand a change.

Let us at least repent of the idea that a good hour or worship and a well-financed church is
enough today and pray,

urgently for the great change,
to our hearts,
minds,
collective will,
communities, and law, let us pray
the great change, that can only be wrought by the Spirit and power of God,
that we desperately need.