



Amos by Gustave Dore'

With *Amos* Chapter 6 we are presented with Israel as a people who have fallen deeply into idolatry. Amos begins Chapter 6 by saying, “Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts!.” Zion was a name often used for Jerusalem, the Capital of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, while the Capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel was situated on a hilltop known as Mount Samaria. So, Amos tells us right away that he is preaching to a wider audience than just a single kingdom. And if Amos is indeed preaching to a wider audience, perhaps he’s also preaching to you and me. Aren’t we the first among the nations in today’s world? Doesn’t the rest of the world so often look to us as an example?

Oh yes, we might be considered an example of hope by some, or an example of wicked idolatry by others in today’s world. But it cannot be denied that “the whole house of Israel,” that is the rest of the modern world does look at and takes careful note of what this nation does with its vast resources. So, yes, most definitely Amos is also preaching to you me.

In verse 2, Amos refers to three different cities: Calneh a great city on the River Tigris; Hamath, a wealthy city 80 miles north of Damascus which connected much of the trade between Mesopotamia and Egypt; and Gath on the rich, fertile plains of the Philistines, a city populated by the Anakim, the race of giants from which Goliath came. All three of these cities were powerful enough in their day, and they all had one thing in common. All three had recently fallen to the army of Assyria, and their peoples had become slaves. It is a warning that, the power grid of this world is in continual flux. The top-dog of **this** present season may well find himself at the bottom of the heap in the next one.

Midway through the passage, verse 4 reads, “Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music.” Here, Amos addresses the opulence that had become the focal point of the nation. Archeologists confirm that inlaying wood with expensive Ivory was a chief mark of wealth in the Kingdom of Israel. These verses describe grand banquets of the choicest meats, consumed while lying prostrate on couches, which had evidently become the fashion of the spoilt rich in this culture. An obsession with “idle songs to the sound of the harp” and Amos’s comparing this practice with the music of David is explained by some scholars as contrasting the self-aggrandizement of this egocentric people of Samaria who composed songs to praise themselves – contrasting that practice with the humble, heartfelt, and Godly Psalms of King David, who instead introduced the harp and music into the worship practices of the Jews, not to extol himself, but in order to glorify God. (See 1 Chron. 15:16, 19-21 – *Unger’s Commentary*, p. 1797) Of course, we wouldn’t know anything about composing songs that extol ourselves, would we???

But the most flagrant idolatry is in verse 6. Amos condemns those “Who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” Drinking great quantities of wine from bowls certainly denotes the debauchery that had become the hallmark of this society, but there’s something more going on here as well, something far darker. Because scholars believe the bowls described here in Amos were actually those cited in Exodus and Numbers that the original Children of Israel fashioned and used according to the instructions of Moses for the sprinkling of the holy blood of sacrifices to Yahweh. It is more than a little disturbing to think that these holy, sanctified vessels would then be used by such a wicked and idolatrous people as nothing more than the stirrup cups of drunken orgies.

Finally, Amos marks this people as “not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” Remember, Joseph’s sons were the Patriarch’s of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, which had been the two most prominent tribes of the Northern Kingdom. These were the two special tribes who had not been tainted with the betrayal of Joseph’s elder brothers, the two tribes who were supposed to stand Godly and faithful, to stand for the justice of all the Children of Israel.

Yet, now they have sunk just as low as the other sons of Jacob, those 11 elder sons who feasted while their youngest brother languished without food or water in a deep pit, these eleven young men who then heartlessly sold their youngest brother Joseph into slavery. (See Gen.37:12-36) And now, the very people of Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's own descendants have tarred themselves with idolatry and greed. And they aren't even sorry. "But take heed!" Amos says. In verse 7 we read, "Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away." "Be warned, greedy nation of Idolaters, for your come-uppance is even now on the way." And sure enough, in less than 30 years, the Northern Kingdom was swept away into two centuries of exile and slavery in Assyria.

Why does God spend so much time warning us about greed and money? Last Sunday, the Gospel lesson finished with the statement. "You cannot serve two masters, God and money." In the chapter from First Timothy from which today's lesson is taken, in the verse just before this morning's reading starts, Paul tells his young friend, "Remember Timothy, the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil; it is through this craving that many have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many [kinds of pain]." Why so much focus on money?

In the parable about Lazarus this morning, did you notice where the poor man was? He lay right there at the rich man's doorway. Day in, day out there he was. Not in Haiti, not in Pakistan, right there at the doorway. And yet, from what I've read, the rich man didn't see him. How is it possible that this kind of poverty and extreme misery could exist right on his very doorstep without this wealthy man seeing it?

The reason has to do with the nature of money itself. Wealth has a way of blinding us. If we are blessed enough to come by a tidy little sum, through a bonus, or an inheritance, or a gift one of the first things we tend to do is to ask ourselves, "Now, how can I invest this? How can I make it grow? How can I protect it from inflation, and insulate it from downturns in the stock market?" The human reaction is almost never, "Now, how can I use this blessing for the glory of God." The problem is, money tends to take our focus off everything else. Money gets our attention! It tends to monopolize our focus, and of-course, just like a camera, when we focus on any one thing like money, all the rest of the world becomes blurry, and slightly fuzzy. If the focus of our vision is centered on money, everything else kind of gets pushed into the fuzzy corners of the photograph. And it's hard to see much of anything in the fuzzy background, when those things become so very out of focus. It's hard to see the pain and misery of other people. Hard to see God, even.

It's not a particularly pleasant message this morning, but then I'm pretty sure it's not meant to be. Much of ministry is exhortation, which really amounts to being a cheerleader for the Lord. A lot of ministry involves comforting the afflicted. But some of ministry also involves afflicting the comfortable

Every single person in this church today, in the eyes of most of the developing world is fabulously rich. Just the fact that you have a flushing toilette sets you apart from the vast majority of people on the planet. And so, since you and I are so blessed, we will always carry with us through life that potential stumbling block to our faith called greed. It's just part of who we are.

So, how are we to protect ourselves from the blindness that can come with this blessing? How are we to make sure that we too do not let our focus drift away from the cross? How can we avoid being blinded to the misery and needs of others? Paul's advice in this regard is so precious this morning. "As for [you] who in the present age are rich, [do not] be haughty, [or] set your hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides [you] with everything for [your] enjoyment...Do good [and] be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share...so that you may take hold of the life that really is life...As for you man of God, pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith, [and] take hold of the eternal life to which you were called." (1Tim.6:11-19, verses various).

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. JWB+ 09/08/16.