



Let Justice Roll Down

Promises of Hope

About the Story

Today's words from Amos address the people of Israel who have grown wealthy and lost sight of the meaning of their relationship with God. Many have become rich farmers, but they have ignored the needs of others in their desire to be successful. In the chapters between our opening verses and those in chapter 5, Amos speaks of God's anger. The people exacerbated this anger by not responding when God wanted them to turn away from their misdeeds and to return to the covenant relationship. (4:6-12) Despite this fierce anger, Amos tells them that God's desire is not punishment but restoration. Instead of their "solemn assemblies," offerings of grain and animals, noisy festivals and songs, God calls the people to a new kind of worship: justice and righteous action. If the people will "seek good and not evil" (verse 14), "hate evil and love good" (verse 15), and care for those in need, God will be with them, and be gracious to them. Finally, God calls the people of Israel to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (verse 24). The images of cool water in a land of desert and dry places suggests new life for the people. If the people can return to just and righteous actions, God will lift up those who have suffered and restore them to their land (9:11-15).

The Point:

Amos reminds us to seek God, hate evil, and serve others. Having a good relationship with God requires more than going to worship every week, saying prayers faithfully, or teaching Sunday school. Amos reminds us that our relationship with God should also include actions of service, justice, and love.

Opening Prayer

God of justice and mercy, sometimes we forget that the purpose of our worship is to please you, rather than be a performance that might "bring in more members." Open our hearts to one another and to you, that we might hear the call spoken through your servant Amos to focus on what is good and just. We pray in the name of the One who embodies justice and righteousness. Amen.

Into the Story

There are lots of different ways to worship God: some are noisy, some are musical, some are active, and some involve silence and stillness. Invite members of your group to share what kind of worship with which they most connect: Singing in church with a praise band or an organ? Walking in the woods or through a prayer labyrinth? Sitting quietly with eyes open or closed? Give space for different kinds of answers and remember that not everyone will want to share.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, the prophet Elijah tried to hide because sharing God's message resulted in death threats. God promised to take care of Elijah and rescue those in Israel who have remained faithful. This week, Amos tells of God's desire for the people to act with justice and righteousness. Next week, the prophet Isaiah describes what will happen when a righteous king will rule. All three stories offer words of hope to those who are faithful and righteous.

Learning the Story

Read Amos 1:1-2 – Amos announces the Word of God.

- ❓ The Book of Amos begins by identifying Amos as a shepherd. When you enter a room of strangers, how do you prefer to be introduced?
- ❓ Amos states that God “roars.” What is your response when someone raises their voice at you?
- ❓ God's voice is so angry and strong that it makes the grass dry up. Have you ever felt powerless in the face of someone else's anger? What did you do about it?

Read Amos 5:14-15 – God calls upon the people to seek the good and turn away from evil.

- ❓ Instead of threatening them, God tells the people to seek the good. What might happen if you started every day looking for the good in other people? How might you be changed?
- ❓ God tells the people to “hate evil.” Generally speaking, Christians are not big on hate. How do you understand what this means?
- ❓ The people of Israel have turned away from caring for others, which has moved them further away from God. What happens when you trust someone to do the right thing, and they do the opposite? Are you angry? Hurt? Do you walk away or give them another chance?

Read Amos 5:21-24 – God clarifies what is important is not fancy worship, but justice.

- ❓ Worship that does not reflect a loving heart is not pleasing to God. What kind of heart beats in your congregation's worship services?
- ❓ God wants justice to “roll down like waters.” What kind of justice “water” do you think would best respond to a situation of injustice? A meandering stream? Mountain rapids? A fresh water pool?

Bible Connections

- ✚ Isaiah sings of God's anger at those who seek to grow rich and prosperous with no thought of justice or righteousness (Isaiah 5:8-16).
- ✚ Micah tells the people that what is required is “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).
- ✚ Jesus meets a Samaritan woman and talks with her about true worship (John 4:20-24).

- ? Righteousness is a word for having a “right relationship” with God, and is described here as something which never stops flowing. What keeps your relationship with God flowing with righteousness? What gets in the way?

Living the Story: Prayer

Write down situations of injustice in your neighborhood, hometown, or nearby city on index cards, one per card. After a short discussion, invite each member of the group to pick any card and to pray aloud, following the format below, or using other words that feel appropriate. Take a deep breath between each prayer. If someone does not wish to pray out loud, they may pray to themselves in silence, and say, “Pass.”

Supplies

- Index cards
- Pens or pencils

Merciful God, I lift up before you _____, a situation that calls out for justice and mercy. Help me to find an organization or group that is working to make a difference, that I might offer them support. May my actions be my worship.

After everyone has had a turn to pray, say together: Amen.

Closing Prayer

God of justice and mercy, help us learn to worship you through our actions on behalf of others. Give us strength in the face of obstacles, courage in the face of fear, and wisdom to find a community of support. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Prophecy (Genre)

Although many people think that prophets are some sort of fortunetellers who can see into the future, prophets in the Hebrew Bible are most often called to speak the truth in crisis situations. They describe how the people of God are not acting according to God’s word, and call upon them to change their behavior before disaster strikes. Prophets usually already have some relationship with the community to which they speak and are not afraid to warn kings or those in power that they will soon be overthrown and replaced by someone God prefers.

While it is tempting for Christians to see references to Jesus in the words of the prophets, they stand in the specific time and place in which they were uttered. For example, Isaiah 45:1-3 mentions the “messiah,” but it is not a reference to Jesus. The prophet is talking about Cyrus, the Persian (non-Jewish) king, who is called “messiah” because he will return the exiled people of God to their homeland.

At Home

- ✚ Look online for organizations that are engaged in justice work. Find out how you might help through direct action, contributions, and/or prayer.
- ✚ At the end of each day, reflect on opportunities, large and small, in which you had a chance to make a difference. Thank God for putting you in the right place at the right time.
- ✚ Go for a walk wherever and whenever it is safe to do so. Imagine that you are the superhero “Justice,” flowing through every place and person you encounter.

Daily Readings**Sunday—Read Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24**

God expresses dismay at false worship practices and calls people to justice and right relationships. Reflect on what in your relationship with God could be improved.

Monday—Read Micah 2:1-13

Despite promising destruction for those who have disregarded the needs of others, God assures protection for those who remain. Commit to finding at least one opportunity to reach out to someone in need.

Tuesday—Read Micah 5:2-5

Expecting an onslaught by the Assyrians, God promises to lift up a “new David” from Bethlehem to rescue the faithful ones of Israel. What in your life could be “made new” so that you could join a justice organization? Pray that God will work with you toward that end.

Wednesday—Read Hosea 1:1; 14:1-9

God promises abundant love and forgiveness for those who repent. Write an email or letter to someone you want to forgive. What do you think would change if you sent it?

Thursday—Read Isaiah 6:1-13

Isaiah feels unworthy to accept God’s call; then is sent to proclaim the destruction of Israel. Imagine you have to tell someone some bad news. Who would you want to take with you?

Friday—Read 2 Kings 19:1-7

A great enemy threatens King Hezekiah, but Isaiah promises God’s protection. Ask God for wisdom and protection from known and unknown dangers.

Saturday—Read 2 Kings 19:14-28

Isaiah proclaims God’s protection against Assyria by mocking their threats and slander. Think about the past week, and ask yourself if you have passed on information that is hurtful to someone else. How will you keep from doing it again?