

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

A WHOLE NEW CHAPTER

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21)

Analysis by Paul Jaster

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!
4Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
5who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
6who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
7Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

DIAGNOSIS: End of Story

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): System Rigged against the Poor

It's the same old story. The system is rigged by the big shots. And the rich become richer and the poor poorer at the expense of the vulnerable and the voiceless. Amos, the Judean sheep-herder from the southern kingdom, chronicles the peak prosperity of the

first families of northern Israel. They lay on beds of ivory (much like my pillow-top bed)...and eat lamb and beef (my two favorites)...and sing idle songs (like the play lists on our cell phones)...and drink wine in bowls (I have a closet full of boutique bottles downstairs)...and anoint themselves with the finest oils (the women in my family have their Oil of Olay). Hmmm. Gotcha! Many in our world live lives of conspicuous consumption, too, including me.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Oblivious Oppressors

Amos is not against wealth, influence, and affluence. He is well-to-do himself: a well-traveled and well-informed shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees. But he is against bribery and extortion, corruption of the judiciary, gross dishonesty, immorality, exploitation of the poor, self-indulgence, big fat egos. The wealthy's biggest injustice is that they do not "grieve" over Joseph (the poor and scammed in northern Israel).

Amos calls leading families to task for their obliviousness to harsh realities. The weak are being sold in slavery for a pair of shoes (i.e., a piece of property). The afflicted are ignored. Wine is bought by the fines imposed on the lower classes. Grand estates are built by ripping off the poor. The leading families in Israel are unfaithful and break one of God's most basic commands, "You shall not afflict the widow or orphan. If you do afflict them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn and I will kill you with the sword" (Exod. 22:22f).

Amos depicts an upper class oblivious to the poor, self-centered and intent on its own pleasure. Does that picture look familiar? They do not see or hear the cry of "Joseph" (their own impoverished brothers and sisters). No wonder Amaziah, the priest of northern Israel, tells Amos to go back south and sheer

his own sheep first.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Oblivious Obliterated Amos is full of “firsts.” He is the first of the “writing” prophets. He is the first to announce God’s judgment on an entire nation. He is the first to speak of the “Day of the Lord,” not as a day of grace, but as a day of punishment. And he is the first to speak God’s terrible message: “The end has come for my people” (8:2). The promised Day of the Lord is turned into the announcement of catastrophic disaster.

Amos sings a funeral dirge for northern Israel in anticipation of its doom. He does not call for repentance. That time has passed. God will not “pass over” (pardon) Israel as God did in Egypt. He will “pass through” them (like the angel of death) and allow an unnamed foe to plunder residences, invade, loot and send the upper classes off to exile. How appropriately ironic! The leading families of Israel shall lead the pitiful column of captives who go into exile.

As promised, the “cry” of the poor will be heard by God and God’s voice will turn into a lion’s roar that will blast and scorch the entire land. A new famine will take place. A famine of God’s Word. The very land promised to the ancestors is the scene of Israel’s death. Their future is a funeral. The leading sanctuary in the north, Beth-el (“house of God”), will become Beth-al (“house of nothingness”).

Because the upper class has enlarged its wealth at the expense of the poor, their very own property will be taken from them. They will not enjoy the fruits of someone else’s labor. They will not live in their fancy houses nor will they drink the fancy wine of the vineyards they have planted. Israel clings to its election: “Chosen therefore blessed.” “Evil shall not overtake or meet us” (9:10). But God saw it differently. “Chosen

therefore all the more responsible." God himself would destroy Israel. Affluent, oblivious (northern) Israel will be obliterated. End of story. Period. Book closed.

PROGNOSIS: A Whole New Chapter

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Restoration & Blessing

And yet, the end of the same old story is not the end. Amos does not have the last word thanks to a "whole new chapter" added in Amos 9:11-15 and all the Bible history that follows. Although the northern kingdom ends in judgment, God will still provide a future for his people through the Davidic kingdom. What God does through David and his descendants leads us to a Jesus who bridges the gap between the rich and poor. And through his cross, suffering, death and resurrection provides a blessing for the poor, the meek, the merciful.

In Jesus, God shifts from wrath to mercy in dealing with God's people. And the fruit of the Holy Spirit is given: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. A new planting of the chosen people becomes the goal towards which the God is working. The curse will be broken. They will rebuild not only cities, but the kingdom of their God. They will plant vineyards and drink wine, especially at the table of the Lord. They will cultivate gardens and eat their fruits. The restoration of God's kingdom is pictured as a tree permanently planted, never again to be uprooted.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Acute Awareness

The concluding word in Amos promises a time of rich fertility and unbroken peace. In the Ancient Near East it was the king's responsibility to set up justice and righteousness. And yet, credit Amos with still another first! Amos is the first to claim that the duty of the king becomes the responsibility and

obligation of every citizen. And certainly, each and every Christian.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Spirited Sensitivity towards the Poor

For there to be true renewal, justice must roll down like the floods after the winter rains, and persist like those few river beds whose streams do not fail in the summer drought (5:24). Amos declares that justice, integrity, honesty, faithfulness, kindness, compassion, and righteousness are God's primary and ultimate desire for God's people. These are the traits that Jesus gives us through his own Spirit no matter how rich or poor we might be. And when it comes to the Holy Spirit, new chapters are being written every day.