

Twenty-Second Sunday after the Pentecost

“JOSH THE PLUMBER”

Amos 5:18-24

Twenty-Second Sunday after the Pentecost Analysis by Chris Repp

18Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; 19as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. 20Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

21I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22Even 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. 23Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Author's note: There is hardly a hint of gospel in this pericope. Indeed the entire book of Amos is rather short on gospel. But there are hints from earlier in chapter 5 that I have drawn on in order to do the necessary task of adding the gospel, and then—for reasons that I think become obvious—I go to John 4 to make the gospel even more explicit.

DIAGNOSIS: Slow Drip

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *A Trickle of Justice and Righteousness*

We've got a plumbing problem. Well, it's not really us who has the problem. You see we're upstream, close to the source, so we think. We've got all we need, really. More than we need. More than our fair share. I'm being a little vague, because I kind of want you to fill in the blanks for yourself. You might not be like me, born a citizen of a prosperous and powerful country, into a stable and loving family, a person of the dominant race. And with regard to the status quo—the way things work—I'm plenty righteous. I went to college, got a job, obey the law, pay my taxes, and I vote. Not only that, but I got married (and stayed married—extra righteousness points for that), had children, bought a house, and participate in the economy. I even go to church. I'm what a lot of people call "a good person," and what others call "blessed." And so are my children. And my parents and relatives (most of them) and friends. But I'm aware that all is not well in the world, even in my prosperous, powerful country. We keep having these economic crises. People are having trouble getting good jobs. Some people work more than full time and still can't make ends meet. Poverty is on the rise. The poor get poorer even as the rich get richer, that's one of the things I hear from the comfort of my couch from my big-screen television. Another thing I hear is that some people, particularly people who don't look like me, are up in arms because they apparently don't feel like there really is liberty and justice for all in the land of the free. They say they are targeted, profiled by the police, excluded from opportunities that others have, disadvantaged by the way things work. And then on top of all that I hear about all those "bad people" in the world, some of them right here at home, but even more "out there" who seem bent on terror and destruction, people who hate me just because I'm a good citizen of this country, because I've

benefitted from the way things work.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Clogged (with Comfort/Wealth/Corruption)

So back to that plumbing problem. It seems that what I tend to take for granted for myself, particularly the justice and righteousness of the way things work, is not a universal experience. But why not? Isn't it because certain kinds of people haven't applied themselves, haven't worked hard in school—which, by the way, is free for everyone in this country through high school? Isn't it the case that some people are just lazy? That they prefer government handouts to an honest day's work? Is it really the way things work that is unfair? It's worked pretty well for me, so I'm inclined to trust that it should also work for others. (Don't try to confuse me with your talk about racial bias, the unfairness of the local funding of schools, or of the availability of health care. Aren't those just excuses?) If the righteousness/justice pipes are clogged, shouldn't those who don't feel they're getting what they need just work to make things better, to unclog the pipes themselves?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Disconnected at the Source

What makes me really uncomfortable, though, is that I can imagine the people of Amos' time saying exactly the same thing, the people who trusted in the way things worked in those days, the people who were the beneficiaries of that status quo. They were merchants who got more than a fair price by fiddling with the scales. They were those who were able to influence the justice system to give them unfair judgments, people who worked the system so that they could live lives of leisure at the expense of those around them who lacked even basic necessities. Here's what I'm really afraid of: that God sees through all the justifications for the way things work and exposes at their core a selfishness and greed that amounts to idolatry. In spite of my

daily prayer for all the people of the world, my weekly participation in worship and the celebration of the Lord's Supper, is my heart really invested elsewhere? And if that is the case, then am I also the object of God's scorn on the lips and pen of Amos? I've been praying every day for the day of the Lord, i.e. for God's kingdom to come. Does God also hate and despise the worship of "good people" like me? I guess I should be careful what I pray for. But is God even listening to me any more? Is the pipe even connected?

PROGNOSIS: Restored Flow

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Reconnected to the Source*

I don't know about you, but I don't do plumbing. Even PVC drains are hard for me to get right. Just ask my spouse. In other words, this plumbing problem is more than I can handle. I'm not going to be fixing it myself. In more conventional terms, I am at the mercy of God. Either God will reject me outright—which it seems is no more than I deserve—or God will intervene to put things right. Hold on, there's someone at the door. It's a plumber. Thank God! Josh the plumber. (The Greeks call him Jesus). "It's worse than I feared," he says, "Your pipes are hooked up all wrong. You're completely cut off from the real source. I can reconnect you, but it's a dangerous job. I'm going to have to go way down underground. Looks to be about a three-day job. I should be back on Sunday." Down he goes. A dangerous job indeed. Costs him his life. But true to his word he's back on Sunday. "You're all reconnected," he says.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Unclogged*

Seems Josh has a water source I hadn't counted on, something he calls "living water." (See John 4). He tells me that this is better than the source I've been relying on, even though it means going down to that dangerous place where he has gone and

being joined to his death in the waters of Holy Baptism (Romans 6). But being joined to his death also connects me to his resurrection. These waters gush up to eternal life (John 4 again). And somehow just hearing this message begins to unclog the pipes and my self-justifying excuses for the way things work begin to be flushed away.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : A Cascade of Justice and Righteousness

Wow. What a difference. The pipes are really cleaned out now. And the water pressure is like a firehose. Way more than I needed. But I suppose that's the point. This isn't just my plumbing problem that has been taken care of, because I'm connected to all these other people. What I've got they need too. Things clearly need to start working differently, and what looked like an impossible demand before Josh came along ("let justice roll down like waters") now is unavoidable (not that I would want to avoid it now). Clearing out the pipes has opened me up to the world that God so loves. Josh accepts my thanks as he heads out the door. But before he goes he hands me some business cards and encourages me to do a little word-of-mouth advertising for him. As if I was going to keep this a secret. As if I could. There's water everywhere! Come and see! (Yes, John 4 again.) Careful what you pray for, I guess.