

## “Reduce”

Amos 8: 4-8; Matthew 6:24-28

Well, I’m sure this was the positive uplifting Scripture we all needed this morning especially with all that is going on in our world, the shooting of two black men, the shooting of Dallas police officers, the anger and the hurt filling our world, slowly destroying us. I’m sure no one came this morning anxiously waiting, wanting to hear these very harsh words from the prophet Amos.

But I have to tell you, it is no longer about what we want to hear. We have come to the point in our lives, in our nation, in our world that it is about the words we need to hear. Words that call us to wake up. Words that shatter our illusions of comfort and peace. Words that confront us with the ugliness and harsh realities of our world.

And that is exactly what Amos does for us this morning. He brings us face to face with the ugly injustices that are shattering and fracturing our world more and more with each passing day.

I’m sure that given all that has been happening in our world lately we as people of faith would much rather focus on the more positive texts found within

our sacred Scriptures, you know the ones like “The Lord is my Shepherd” or “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son so that we might live”.

We like these texts. They help us find peace in a crazy world. They help center us in the presence of God. They remind us to have hope and to not be afraid.

Now, please don’t hear me saying that there is anything wrong with these texts. Over the last few days, these are the very texts that I have been turning to as I have tried to make sense of this hate filled hurt filled world.

But these beautiful comforting texts are only part of our story as people of faith. There is a whole lot more in our Bible, to our Bible, parts that remind us that in moments such as these, moments when it seems like the world is falling apart, we as the people of God are called to stand up and speak out for justice, no matter how hard or uncomfortable it may be. We are called to confront the injustices that fill our world head on. We are called to bring light to the darkness that is threatening to overtake our world.

That’s why as I read the Amos text I was reminded of words from other prophets, prophets who spoke out for justice, prophets who saw the brokenness ripping our world apart and said Enough, prophets who reminded us time and time again that the Gospel message is not always easy to live out in our lives. These prophets reminded us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ asks and expects much from

us as people of faith. It demands that we take action when we come face to face with the very things that are not of God, the very things that are destroying our world. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to be love, to show love, to do love even when it seems like the world is falling apart.

As I read the words from the prophet Amos, I was reminded of other prophets who were killed as they strived to live out the Gospel message through their words and actions one prophet being: Dr. Martin Luther King who said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that”. And Oscar Romero, who was a prominent Roman Catholic priest in El Salvador during the 1960s and 1970s, who became Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. After witnessing numerous violations of human rights, he began to speak out on behalf of the poor and the victims of repression, and when coming face to face with the injustices harming God’s people, he said these words: *A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?”*

Powerful words from two prophets who knew it was and is not enough for the church, for the people of God to seek only comfort for ourselves. We are called to make justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. So with that in

mind, I invite us to take another look at what Amos is calling us to do as people of faith.

Right from the start, I have to say that this is the Sabbath sermon that I have been dreading since we first began this series. I don't know why I picked this text or why it chose me but time and time again, every time I tried to find another text to share for today, I always kept coming back to Amos.

You see, this Sabbath thing is pretty easy and acceptable as long as we keep the conversation to nice, comfort things like rest and renewal. But when we start talking about Sabbath keeping as a way to practice justice, to bring justice to our world, well then, the preacher has gone from preaching to meddling.

Here's why I say this: At the beginning of the week, I had a plan for where and how this sermon should go. As we look at this text, it is pretty easy to see and hear that Amos is talking about the economic conditions that were practiced during Israel at that time. It is easy to see and hear that he is calling out the rich and the powerful for taking advantage of the poor and needy, making their worth equal to the value of a pair of sandals or a small silver coin.

All week, I had a plan for this sermon. But as the week progressed the Holy Spirit and unfortunately the world had a different plan. Even on Friday morning as I sat down to type up what I had written out just the day before, I could hear the

voices of the prophets, Amos, Martin Luther King and Oscar Romero, saying, “That’s too easy. That’s too easy of a message to hear. That’s too easy of message to say. That’s too easy of a message for the people of God in moments like these.”

Even as I tried to stick with my plan for this sermon, I could hear the prophets saying, “Listen to the cries coming from the darkness. Listen to the wails coming from the streets. Now is the time for the people of God to confront the harsh realities and the brutal injustices that are threatening to rip apart the Body of Christ.”

And so I did. I heard lots of cries coming from hearts breaking because violence had taken the lives of their loved ones. I heard lots of hateful words being spoken to others all because of the color of their skin, the religion they practice or the person they love. As I listened to the silence, I heard all of creation groaning in pain as brokenness and hurt became the new normal for all of God’s people.

And then...then I heard another voice being lifted up in the mix, a voice that sounded so much like my voice, a voice that kept, saying, “I’m trying to do the best that I can. I’m not part of the problem. I’m not prejudice. I’m not a racist. I’m not hurting the poor. I’m not taking advantage of anyone. I’m not using or abusing anyone. I’m just trying to live out the Gospel message the best way that I know how, so Amos why are you looking at me? Amos, why are you including me as

part of the people to whom you are speaking out against? Amos, why are you saying these words to me?

As soon as I asked that question, I knew I had my answer. Amos's words continued to bother me all week because no matter how much I wanted to deny it, they included me. They included me because his prophetic words of justice and denial address a larger issue. They address the systematic problem, address the systemic injustices that I participate in and yes even allow, simply because I am part of the system.

Let me explain: "No matter how good our intentions may be, it is difficult not to get caught up in the assumptions, in the systems, in the workings of the society in which we live. We are like the fish in the fishbowl—so immersed in the water it swims in that it scarcely realizes the water exists. Or like how we as human beings walk around all day breathing in the air we need to sustain our lives without conscious awareness that it is there. Just so, the assumptions, the injustices, the workings, the very broken systems that our society is based on often become just that...unnoticed, taken for granted, a part of our lives together, often unquestioned and unchallenged.

You see, right before these verses, Amos describes how the nation of Israel had become numb, numb to the harmful systems, numb to the unquestioned and

unchallenged isms that were a part of their day to day life, Israel had become so numb to the news of shootings, poverty, abuse, war, and hate that they ignored the fact that their life, their supposed good life, was built upon the hurt and oppression of others. Everyone and everything had been reduced to a commodity, objects to be used and abused, objects to be bought and sold. Everyone and everything had been reduced to labels used to separate and divide, making no one a neighbor, no one a part of the community. They were just another object that was a part of a broken system. Which in doing so, in allowing everyone and everything to be reduced to just objects, meant that the very people of God were not making of justice, bringing healing and wholeness for all of God's creation, which an essential part to being and living as a person of God.

When Amos spoke, when Amos pointed out the unchallenged, unquestioned injustices that were destroying God's people, the people of Israel could not ignore it any longer. They could no longer pretend that Amos was only just talking to the rich and powerful, placing the blame solely at their feet. They realized that he was talking to all of Israel. He was talking to all of God's people. He was talking to all of the community from the ones who had good intentions to the ones who sought only to use and abuse, from the ones who protested against the isms with signs and marches to the ones that remained silent and ignored them. Amos was including all

of God's people in the judgement against Israel. Amos was including all in the failure to make justice for all of God's children.

Now that's the difficult part, the part where the preacher goes from preaching to meddling, the part that brings us face to face with the injustices of our world. Sure we try to do the best we can. We try to live our faith each and every day through our words and our actions, but the harsh reality is that more often than not, we fail simply because we remain silent. We remain silent when we come face to face with the injustices of our world. We remain silent when we see hurt and hate overtaking our world. We remain silent when we experience the broken systems of our world going unchallenged and unquestioned.

And in the words of the late prophet, Elie Wiesel, Silence is never an option. "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe. [We must become people of Justice.]

Because, you see the thing about Justice is that it is at the very heart and character of who our God is. As true and good, our God seeks to make us, as ones transformed by of God's love, God seeks to make us whole. God seeks to make God's creation whole. This is what motivates God throughout the Old and New Testaments. That is what motives our God to still be at work in our world today.

And as the people of God, the ones that God has named and claimed, the ones that bear the image of God in our hearts and in our souls, God demands that we reflect God's character of love, grace and yes, justice at all times, not just when it is convenient for us. Because God is concerned with making every realm of God's creation whole every single minute, every single second, every single day.

So when the prophets, Amos, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, through their words and actions, wake us up, shake us out of our numbness, when they bring us face to face with the harsh realities and injustices of the world, when they remind us that we are called to be people of justice, we can no longer be silent. We must act. We must speak out. We must be the light, driving out the darkness. We must begin to put things right again — to fix, repair, and restore broken relationships. We must be the people God created us, calls us, and needs us to be: people of love, people of grace, and more importantly people of justice.

I do not stand before you today, pretending to have all the answers. I do not stand before you preaching at you, pretending that Amos' harsh words do not implicate me in my complacency in the system as well. I simply stand before you as one who has had enough...as one who asks for God's mercy to come, as one who remembers a different part of Amos's words, words that tell us to Seek good and not evil, to Hate evil and love good, so that God's justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

So with these words in mind, may we always find the strength and the courage to speak out in moments like these, in moments when people are being reduced to things, being reduced to labels, being reduced to objects to be used and abused. And in doing so, may God's justice bring healing and wholeness for all of God's creation. Amen.