

# Amos

The Book of

Session Three:  
January 18, 2005

*Amos 3:1-8—“How Can I Keep From—Speaking?”*

## ❖The Text (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup>*Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt:*

<sup>2</sup>*You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.*

<sup>3</sup>*Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment?*

<sup>4</sup>*Does a lion roar in the forest, when it has no prey?*

*Does a young lion cry out from its den, if it has caught nothing?*

<sup>5</sup>*Does a bird fall into a snare on the earth, when there is no trap for it?*

*Does a snare spring up from the ground, when it has taken nothing?*

<sup>6</sup>*Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid?*

*Does disaster befall a city, unless the LORD has done it?*

<sup>7</sup>*Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.*

<sup>8</sup>*The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?*

## ❖What's going on here?

-v.1-2—Amos is quick to identify himself as speaking on behalf of God. His message, although shocking and harsh, is not his own invention, but he claims that he is speaking what God has given him to announce. But in addition to giving his own credentials—announcing who *he* is—Amos is quick to identify the *God* whom he represents. For the God whom Amos claims to speak for is the very

God whom Israel has known throughout history as YHWH (the LORD). Amos says that the God who brought them out of Egypt, who called their ancestors to a new and promised land, is the same God now speaking to Israel. Underlying Amos' words of judgment is the (often implicit) understanding that the God who speaks them is not a new deity but the One who has been faithful and good to Israel consistently. And so Amos will again and again draw on Israel's collective memory to remind them of who God has been for them and who they have been called to be themselves in light of their own salvation history.

And in fact, precisely *because* of that history, *because* of Israel's special status as the chosen people of God, this same God will hold them accountable for the ways their society has forgotten justice and mercy. Amos appeals to a tradition older than himself, one that recurs elsewhere in the prophets: that part of what it meant for Israel to be God's elect people was for it to be an *alternative* community shaped God's ways and character. Israel was blessed *to be a blessing*—to be “a light to the nations,” to be marked by the way it cared for the poor among them and treated people justly. And so, rather than giving them diplomatic immunity from God's will for them, Israel's place as the chosen people of YHWH becomes the very grounds for YHWH's judgment against them.

It is also important that Amos identify the God whom he represents specifically as Israel's covenant partner YHWH to emphasize the justice aspect of his message. In an age when every nation worshipped its own god, misfortune or military defeat were often chalked up to the defeat of one's god. But Amos will not let his audience go there—their prosperity is not a divine stamp of approval for the ways they have become prosperous, nor will their nation's coming destruction be the work of some other people's god

defeating their own. No, Israel's very own God, far from being caught by surprise when the judgment comes, will be the one doing the surprising and the one doing the judging. Israel's redeemer YHWH will be the one holding them accountable for the ways they have turned from justice.

Two final comments should be made on 3:2, and both deal with the Hebrew standing behind our English translation. First of all, YHWH claims to have "known" only Israel—this is not merely a cognitive knowledge (as though God were not aware that there were other people on the earth), but speaks of an intimate relationship and commitment. In Genesis 4:1, it is this kind of "knowing" between the first couple that produces children—it refers to sexual love. In Genesis 18:19, the same word is used for YHWH choosing Abraham (and especially noteworthy here is how this knowing/choosing is connected with a purpose for Abraham's children: that they become a people characterized by God's own justice and righteousness).

The point is that Amos, for all the severity of speech that he attributes to YHWH, understands this God to be the God who knows Israel intimately, who has loved and cared for Israel all along. In some ways, that makes the oracles of destruction somehow less hopeless, since the God who speaks them is a God who seems to be always full of surprises and able to transform hopelessness into something new and hope-*full*. But in other ways, the intimate character of God's relationship with Israel makes Amos' words all the more terrible and tragic, since the One who calls for the end of Israel has known and loved Israel intimately. By holding this intimate "knowing" of Israel with God's harsh words against that same Israel, Amos declares that divine love is a fierce love—a love that is good, but not safe—and so God refuses to let Israel's unjust ways stand.

The second translation note is about the English

clause, "I will punish you for all your iniquities." The connotation of *punishment* may evoke a capricious or vindictive image, as though God is eager to see Israel suffer for the sake of suffering. The Hebrew is closer to, "I will visit your sins upon you." That is to say, Israel will not receive an arbitrary or outlandish sentence from God, but will in some sense reap what it has sown. The sense is closer to the idea that Israel's guilty parties will be made to feel what they have inflicted on others—their own sins will be visited upon themselves. The Hebrew idiom captures a sense of God's action as an unfortunate *consequence* of the ways Israel has lived rather than an angry threat of a random lightning bolt thrown from heaven. Later in the chapter, Amos will flesh out this idea of "visiting sins" as he describes the coming fate of the powerful within Israel with a certain poetic justice.

v.3-8—The beginning of this chain of proverb-like questions seems a rather abrupt change of gears from 3:1-2, which had been cast in the speech of YHWH. It no longer seems that YHWH is still the one speaking as "I," but we now have a 3rd-person perspective. What's going on here? It almost seems as though Amos has to break from delivering his message to stop and answer the question of what gives him the authority to give such a strong word of judgment. We get a glimpse later in chapter seven that Amos' message met with a great deal of opposition, as though his audience in Israel questions his authority to meddle in the business of the life and society of the northern kingdom. Surely, too, there were people who could not understand how God could be threatening disaster on them when life was prosperous and quiet for them. What gave Amos the right to shake things up as he was doing?

In response to those questions of his vocation and message, Amos offers a few questions of his own in 3:3-8. But his are rhetorical questions—that is, they are asked not in order to find an unknown answer,

but precisely because their answers are so obvious they do not need to be said. This is an important interpretive key for this set of verses, for the questions Amos asks may not seem as obvious to us as they were intended to be for his first audience. But for the prophet, these questions all beg an obvious “no.” Verses 3-5 all offer effects which assume an obvious cause—Amos draws on examples from nature and everyday life that follow a simple cause-and-effect pattern. A contemporary proverbial expression might be to ask, “where there’s smoke, isn’t there always a fire somewhere?” Amos is establishing a pattern with examples that his audience can hardly dispute that where an effect is found, its cause must be behind it.

This pattern continues in v.6, although the first half of the verse flips the order and begins with a cause before proceeding to its effect. The second half of 3:6 is a little thornier, because it continues in the pattern of questions with obvious answers, while we may be uncomfortable jumping to the same conclusions as Amos. 3:6b assumes that when any “disaster befalls a city,” God has been the cause (whether directly or indirectly). This raises the ancient question of whether God can be the source of both good *and* evil, of creation *and* destruction, and it also forces us to ask whether we can always place responsibility on God for events in our world and lives (see **Connections** for a longer discussion of this). In any case, Amos assumes, as did most people in ancient near-Eastern cultures that all events were directed by God or gods. More pointedly, Amos again names the source of the hypothetical disaster as Israel’s covenant God YHWH. Again, he is driving home the point that when the judgment on Israel comes, it will not be by some cosmic accident as though YHWH were not aware of it, nor will it be the action of some *other* god. YHWH will bring the disaster, says Amos, although it bears repeating that he always understands this disaster as the response of God to undo Israel’s widespread injustice.

In any case, even 3:6 and 3:7 (which breaks the chain of questions and leads many to suspect that this is a later parenthetical insertion) serve to build this string of rhetorical questions which then comes to a climax with the parallel questions of 3:8—the divine *cause*, “the Lord GOD has spoken,” must bring about its effect: Amos can do no other but to prophesy (see also Is. 55:10-11 and Jer. 1:6-10 for other places in the prophets where God’s word has a similar power and effect). This is his self-defense as a prophet—without giving us a list of reasons or credentials to prove that he is authorized to announce the coming end of Israel, Amos simply declares that YHWH, who had always called Israel to be a people of justice and mercy, was speaking again to Israel. Amos could not help but announce the word he knew came from God.

#### **Connections: Where There’s Smoke...**

-Amos baldly assumes that God stands behind even the disastrous events of our world. While his main message thus far has stressed the destruction of *Israel* specifically as God’s doing (without necessarily claiming responsibility for all events in the world), in 3:6 (and then later in 4:6ff), Amos seems to open that assumption up to any event that happens. This would nicely resolve some of our questions about why evil or disastrous things happen (questions that we may ask ourselves in the wake of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean). But Amos’ assumption seems to be overturned (or at least thrown into question) by Jesus’ ambiguity of belief in places like John 9 where he denies that God has sent blindness as a punishment, or Luke 13:1-5, where Jesus denies a direct connection between human sin and disasters. So what do you think? Can we point to events in our world—good or bad—and nail down where God has been doing something? Are all disasters divinely-sent—are any disasters divinely-sent? What leads you to your answers?

-What do the person and life of Jesus tell us about the character of God, and what might that say about how we interpret disasters in the world?

-Even if we are uncertain about God’s responsibility for disaster in the world, can we have certainty about how we respond as servants of God in the face of disaster? How is God at work through us?

Amos 3:9-15—Plundering the Plunderers❖ **The Text (NRSV)**

<sup>9</sup>*Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod, and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt, and say, "Assemble yourselves on Mount Samaria, and see what great tumults are within it, and what oppressions are in its midst."*

<sup>10</sup>*They do not know how to do right, says the LORD, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.*

<sup>11</sup>*Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: An adversary shall surround the land, and strip you of your defense; and your strongholds shall be plundered.*

<sup>12</sup>*Thus says the LORD: As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.*

<sup>13</sup>*Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob, says the Lord GOD, the God of hosts:*

<sup>14</sup>*On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground.*

<sup>15</sup>*I will tear down the winter house as well as the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall come to an end, says the LORD.*

❖ **What's going on here?**

-v.9-11—Amos is once again up to his old tricks of leading us where we *think* we want to go and then pulling the rug out from under us. The declaration at the beginning on 3:9 sounds like a summons to see something spectacular in Israel—the nations are being invited to the northern kingdom's capital city of Samaria. More specifically, the nations named were classically remembered as enemies of Israel and peoples famous for their brutality. Egypt, of course, was not only an empire that continually vied for power in the land of Palestine, but as Amos has reminded us, was the nation in which Israel was

enslaved before being delivered by YHWH. Ashdod (some translations read "Assyria," which was another large empire and enemy of Israel, but seems less likely to be the original text) was one of the Philistine cities and was named back in 1:8. The Philistines were also remembered as having had a nasty past with Israel. So we may be expecting another rant against the evils of the nations as we had in ch.1-2. And we may even think that right up until the imaginary ambassadors from these two peoples are called to Mount Samaria to see it in all its glory—or rather, as Amos tells it, in all its oppressiveness. God has not invited them to boast of how virtuous the chosen people are, but rather to expose their sin for what it is. And the fact that Amos picks nations with reputations for being oppressive themselves only twists the dagger even more—even *these* nations, where brutality and violence have been cultivated into an art, will be surprised at the unjust ways and "oppressions" in Israel's society.

On top of that, Amos plays on the image of strongholds in 3:9-11. One might normally think of storing up wealth or provisions or military supplies in a fortress/"stronghold," but Amos sees all of these as put to the use of oppressing the powerless within Israel. And so he says that the *powerful*, who have been storing up "violence and robbery" through their hoarding of wealth and power, will be made to feel the effects of that way of life. They have effectively *plundered* their own people—their fellow citizens in Israel—and so God's response, the "visiting of their sins," will be to *plunder them* by sending an adversary to empty those same "strongholds." Amos doesn't name a particular outside nation or empire who will be that "adversary," again leaving open the real possibility that it is ultimately YHWH who is acting.

-v.12—We now have a new, independent thought and image that makes Amos' message terribly graphic. For those who are seeking "rescue" from the coming "plundering" in 3:11, Amos turns the idea of "rescue" on its head. To those still thinking confidently that

they will escape whatever judgment may come and who plan to remain safe and comfortable in their homes while others face the oncoming enemy, Amos announces that the destruction coming to Israel will be universal. Anything that “survives” what YHWH will bring will not be “Israel” but a dead carcass of Israel. And indeed, when Assyria did conquer the northern kingdom a generation after Amos’ words were first heard, Israel as a nation was done for—it never came back from exile to re-form as a nation.

The image of “rescuing” the uneaten part of the sheep is probably inspired from a practice mentioned in the Torah where the hired shepherd could be absolved of having to pay for a sheep if evidence (the uneaten remains) could be produced to show it had been killed by a wild animal and not stolen or eaten by the shepherd (see, for example, Exodus 22:10-13). Amos uses this idea to refer to the leftovers of Israel—ironically, the “rescue” of Israel’s remaining pieces will only prove that it is completely dead. But in addition to painting this grisly—and therefore very powerful—picture, Amos’ comparison points another damning finger at the wealthy and comfortable elites who are the main objects of Amos’ speeches. The *leftover* pieces are “the corner of a couch and part of a bed”—symbols and places of comfort and idleness (an image that will come back in 6:4ff). In other words, Amos is again directing his word of judgment especially on those within Israel who have been made comfortable and insulated, who can recline on their couches at the expense of others.

-v.13-15—With another new image and call to “hear,” Amos sets his sights again on the ‘beautiful people.’ Both the centers of religious power and individual wealth are named here—Bethel was a site of worship throughout Israel’s history (Genesis 28 tells the story of Jacob’s vision of God there, for example) and had become a government-sponsored worship site when the kingdoms split. Chapter four will develop some of the *why* behind the attack on the religious sites of

Israel, but here Amos lays the groundwork for his later claim that God is not impressed with signs of religious piety that become excuses not to live out that piety in love for the neighbor. The image of the “horns of the altar” refers to the design of sacrificial altars in the ancient near-East, which were square or rectangular and had raised points, or “horns” at the corners. To cut the “horns” off the altar was essentially to desecrate it as a holy place—and for Amos, when God does it, it will be merely to make visible the *unholiness* of the so-called holy place.

The last image in chapter three is the destruction of houses, and specifically of houses that are symbols of unjust luxury. The mention of “summer” and “winter” houses implies that the owners are wealthy enough to have two homes—the comfort of extravagance that allows people to be indifferent and apathetic will be put to an end. Even the reference to “Bethel” plays on this house theme, since the name is Hebrew for “*house* of God.” Amos will not even tolerate luxury in the name of religion when it deafens ears to God’s call to be a people of justice and compassion.

#### **Connections: Is Being Wealthy Wrong?**

-Is it morally wrong to be rich—now there’s a loaded question! And more than that, it’s probably a grossly over-simplified question, too. Amos lived in a time and culture where wealth was understood to be limited: my gain necessarily meant someone else’s loss. In a day and age where we have seen examples (if not many!) of affluent people doing good with their wealth, maybe we need to see this as more complicated than equating the “rich” (however we define rich) with evil and the “poor” (again, however defined) with good. So what does Amos’ message against those who are comfortably wealthy say to us today?

-How could material abundance blind us to the needs of others? What can we do about that blindness?

-What are things that we *hoard* for ourselves? Why do we do it—fear? Comfort? What might change it?