

Amos

The Book of

Session Four:
January 18, 2005

Amos 4:1-3—Guilt by Apathy

❖The Text (NRSV)

⁴*Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on
Mount Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to their husbands,
"Bring something to drink!"*

²*The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness:
The time is surely coming upon you,
when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fishhooks.*

³*Through breaches in the wall you shall leave,
each one straight ahead;
and you shall be flung out into Harmon,
says the LORD.*

❖What's going on here?

Chapter 3 had ended by announcing judgment on one of Israel's religious centers, Bethel, and then letting loose on the mansions that symbolized economic power run amok. Here, Amos turns his attention to another center of power in Israel—now the political capital of the northern kingdom, Samaria. As he had done in chapters one and two, Amos gives snapshot vignettes to make his point—images and instances to represent the condition of the whole people. So here in 4:1-3, the attack on the wives of the wealthy and powerful men of Israel is not meant to indict *only* females, nor to let the men of Samaria off the hook. Rather, the situations and images Amos describes stand in for all the ways Israelite society has given up concern for the poor—and for justice more broadly. The message gains its power, though, by being specific and depicting concrete, real-life kinds of people, as well as using strong visual language to describe their situation.

So whom, specifically, does Amos have in mind by addressing the “cows of Bashan who are on Mount

Samaria”? Maybe we first need to back up and ask what a “cow of Bashan” is supposed to be. For starters, Bashan is a region northeast of Israel across the Jordan River that was known for its prime, sleek cattle (see also Deut. 32:14, Ps. 22:12, Ezek. 39:18); think of it as the ancient near East's version of the “Texas Longhorn.” In other words, these are strong, well-fed, even beautiful animals. That raises another point: calling the women of Samaria's elites “cows” is not an insult—at least not *directly*. The language in love poetry like the Song of Songs (which compares the beloved woman to, among other things, sheep, goats, deer, and birds) suggests that this cow-talk was complimentary language, describing the “beautiful people” in all their pampered and preened glory. Amos is addressing the “fat cats,” to borrow from our own expressions, who have become a class over against the people caught in the rat race, so to speak. And more specifically, Amos is calling to account those who live in comfort and have become insulated and apathetic in the face of others' needs. The wives of Israel's powerbrokers epitomize this sin of apathy for Amos—they may not be *directly* responsible for strong-arming people out of their property, selling debtors into slavery, or pulling strings in the courts, but they are *complicit* with all of those injustices. Amos is condemning a whole system that allows people to tune out and order another round of drinks (v.3: “Bring something to drink!”) so they can ignore the effects of their actions on others.

And so with his usual sense of irony and poetic justice, Amos declares that the ones who live a lush life at the expense of others will be treated as the Holsteins they are—they will be herded from their comfortable places behind the city walls and driven out with cattle prods. The “hooks” Amos envisions conjure up images of both the sharp prods used to herd animals and the weapons used to break through city walls. And the reference to “Harmon” in 4:3 may well be a variation on the name of Mount Hermon, which fittingly enough is in the region of Bashan—closing the circle from 4:1.

Again, Amos has this sense of God's poetic justice that reverses injustice; what's more, Amos has not declared war not only on the perpetrators of injustice themselves, but also on a whole system of society complicit with the "actual" wrongdoers.

Amos 4:4-5—Who Is Worship For?

❖The Text (NRSV)

⁴Come to Bethel—and transgress;

to Gilgal—and multiply transgression;

bring your sacrifices every morning,

your tithes every three days;

⁵bring a thank-offering of leavened bread,

and proclaim freewill offerings, publish them;

for so you love to do, O people of Israel! says the Lord GOD.

❖What's going on here?

In many churches, modern and ancient, worship has begun with a formal invitation or "call to worship." It takes a variety of forms, but generally, a call to worship serves to invite people to focus on God, to dedicate the following time to praise, and often will give a reason behind the worship (sometimes the idea is 'we should worship God because God is good to us' or 'come and worship God because God is worthy of our adoration'). Sometimes those "reasons" go unspoken or are simply understood without saying, but generally, worshippers understand that they do what they do because of who God is—not that God needs worship but that God is worthy of being worshipped.

Things were no different with the liturgical life of Israel, and we find calls to worship in the Hebrew Scriptures, too. The psalms are full of them—look at Psalm 95:6-7, which is a call to corporate worship:

"O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker.
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand."

Psalm 100 is another good example of a call to worship, and just as with many churches' modern forms, there is a flow and logic to the call. First there is the **invitation**—the actual words calling people to a specific act of worship (kneeling, singing, praising, etc.);

Connections: Tuning It Out

-What are things in our lives that let us ignore the needs of other people? Are those things always "bad" in and of themselves, or do they become "bad" by how we use them—or how they use us?

-Amos has talked broadly about how Israel's upper crust "oppresses the poor," but what specifically do you think that might look like in his society? In our society? Are *all* differences between the affluent and those with less money issues of justice? How do you know?

-The prophets talk about "justice" a great deal in reference to relations between rich and poor—but what does justice mean when it comes to society and money? What do you think of when you think of social justice—everyone having the same income? Does it mean everyone getting access to the same opportunities? Does it mean each person earning his or her own keep without help from the outside? What shapes your definition of "justice"?

-You buy a pair of shoes made by a company suspected of overworking children in their factories overseas—do you have a responsibility for the company's policies by buying their product? Why or why not? What are ways that we might be complicit in others' sins—even half a world away—by ignoring them?

-There are clearly countless needs related to poverty, even in our own country—adequate housing, providing food, medical help for those who cannot pay doctors, homelessness, the effect of poor neighborhoods on surrounding school, and many more. These can easily seem an endless and vicious circle, and all those needs compete for our attention and energy, along with all of the needs and concerns of our own lives. It can easily seem as though biblical calls for "justice" demand so much from us that we will be consumed before we do "enough"—so how can we faithfully work to help people in need without burning out? How might we find meaningful hope in the words of Amos that God "has sworn by his holiness" to set things right as we work to meet the needs of others?

sometimes the call is to a specific place (Ps. 100:4 has “enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.”) Then comes the **“for” clause**—the reason that the people are being called to worship. In both of the psalm examples, that *reason* is grounded in God and the relationship the people have with God. In Psalm 95, that reason is, “For we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” Psalm 100 says that God is worthy of being praised because of “steadfast love” that endures forever.

Why this lesson in ancient liturgical forms? What does this have to do with Amos? Amos knows the traditional forms and flows of worship and calls-to-worship in his time. And as he has done before, he takes those forms, uses them, and then turns them on their heads. Amos begins with the *invitation* to come to specific worship sites in the northern kingdom—we have already seen Bethel come up (see 3:14) and may remember that this place has a long history in the Old Testament of being a place of worship. Similarly, Gilgal was a place associated with a long tradition of worship and figured prominently in the stories of Joshua rededicating the people to YHWH as they entered the promised land. So far, this sounds like a standard call to worship—a specific place is named, and these are places associated with proper—and historic—worship of God.

Then comes the first twist—the invitation is to come to these places “and transgress”—to *rebel*. Amos declares that their worship in these places—even in these holy places—is not faithful worship to God but has become a rebellion against God. As Amos’ parody continues, he invites them to “multiply transgression,” which not only stands in parallel to the first half of the invitation, but makes way for an almost silly list of sacrifices. The frequency of sacrifices—some every morning, tithing every three days, etc.—is far more than the Law required at any point. This is a joke, and the point is to say, “God is not accepting your worship as it stands—go ahead and try to win God over with heaps of

sacrifices, but it won’t work. That’s not the problem.” So if the problem is not that the people aren’t in church—they’re even willing to come *extral*—and the problem is not that they’re unwilling to offer sacrifices, what is the problem? Amos gives a big clue with the last line of his satirical call to worship, which is traditionally where the *reason* part of the call to worship happens. Rather than being drawn to worship because of who *God* is or out of grateful response to God’s faithfulness, Amos accuses the people of going through the liturgical motions because of their own self love: “for so you love to do, O people of Israel!”. The people are bent in on themselves—we saw the same in 4:1-3 with the insulated elites of Samaria—and as a result, even their worship really becomes about *themselves*.

Amos will develop this theme at the end of chapter 5 and then elsewhere in the book, but even here one gets the sense that Amos cannot stand the disconnect between people’s actions toward each other and their actions intended toward God. In 5:21-24, Amos will tell the people that they have become consumed by liturgical form at the expense of living out Amos’ favorite two words, “justice” and “righteousness.” Amos isn’t attacking the idea of worship or even the sacrificial system, so much as he is attacking the ways it gets used as a substitute for a way of life. It has become an either/or—*either* the people can live in the way of YHWH (with mercy and justice for each other) *or* they can execute the proper liturgical forms. Amos announces that when this split happens between how I live with others and what I say toward God, something has gone horribly awry. At this point, worship ceases to really be about God and becomes about my needs—to *buy off* God with offerings, to earn my keep before God with pious-sounding words, to convince myself of my piety, to distract myself from the ways I am stepping on other people and failing to love my neighbor. The question for Amos always is—*whom* is worship for? Because if it is really for God, then it will always lead me back out to love and care for others.

There is more to be said about worship over all—and for us as Christians (and Lutheran Christians especially), there is always the reminder that even when we come to worship *for God*, we are always met with a God who turns things around and blesses us. And we must hold Amos' words in the context of the sure promise of grace that tells us our status before God is not dependent on how many good deeds we do for our neighbors, even as it is not about doing the right liturgical ceremonies. But we would do well not to let that sure promise of grace deafen our ears to the continuing call to love our neighbors—rather, the grace that draws us in to know that we are beloved by a God worthy of worship is the same grace that always sends us back out to live out our worship in love for the world.

Amos 4:6-13—“Yet You Did Not Return”

❖ The Text (NRSV)

⁶*I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.*

⁷*And I also withheld the rain from you when there were still
three months to the harvest; I would send rain on one city,
and send no rain on another city; one field would be rained
upon, and the field on which it did not rain withered; ⁸so two
or three towns wandered to one town to drink water, and were
not satisfied;
yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.*

⁹*I struck you with blight and mildew; I laid waste your gardens
and your vineyards; the locust devoured your fig trees and your
olive trees;
yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.*

¹⁰*I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt; I
killed your young men with the sword; I carried away your
horses; and I made the stench of your camp go up into your
nostrils;
yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.*

¹¹*I overthrew some of you, as when God overthrew Sodom and
Gomorrhah, and you were like a brand snatched from the fire;
yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.*

¹²*Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this
to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!*

¹³*For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind,
reveals his thoughts to mortals, makes the morning darkness,
and treads on the heights of the earth-- the LORD, the God
of hosts, is his name!*

❖ What's going on here?

Amos has done it again—he's taken a formula, probably of his own creation, and repeated it over and over again into a chain. There's no twist exactly, as there had been in ch. 1-2, but the form is clear: YHWH claims responsibility for past events of calamity as judgment/correction, and each one ends with the phrase, “Yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.” Much as Amos had hinted at in ch.3, YHWH is claiming responsibility for past acts of judgment in Israel's history—a prospect that is uncomfortable for many of us to hear, and which is hard to know what to do with in application to disasters we face today. But for Amos, the point is more than just that God has brought punishment on Israel in the past—those have been intended by God, says Amos, always to bring about Israel's return. The motivation has not been vindictiveness or spite, but a desire to restore Israel's society to faithfulness to God and to a living love for neighbors. The acts named in verses 6—11 fit largely with the “curses” in Israel's covenant with YHWH remembered in Deuteronomy; in other words, traditionally, Israel understood its relationship with God such that when they were unfaithful, God would send punishments to lead them to return. Now Amos says all those attempts have failed—and thus Amos utters the terrible promise of YHWH, “prepare to meet your God!” For Israel to be what God is calling ti to be, something radically new will have to happen.