

Amos

The Book of

Session Ten:
March 1, 2005

Amos 9:1-6—Nowhere to Run

❖The Text (NRSV)

I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said:

*Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake,
and shatter them on the heads of all the people;
and those who are left I will kill with the sword;
not one of them shall flee away,
not one of them shall escape.*

²*Though they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.*

³*Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the sea-serpent,
and it shall bite them.*

⁴*And though they go into captivity in front of their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them;
and I will fix my eyes on them for harm and not for good.*

⁵*The Lord, GOD of hosts,
he who touches the earth and it melts,
and all who live in it mourn,
and all of it rises like the Nile,
and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt;*

⁶*who builds his upper chambers in the heavens,
and founds his vault upon the earth;
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out upon the surface of the earth--
the LORD is his name.*

❖What's going on here?

-v.1-4—Here in this final vision report, which is unlike the four in 7:1-8:3 in some ways, Amos sees Israel's covenant God YHWH destroying a place of worship

and seeking out the people of Israel “for harm and not for good.” This is the most painful, severe word of all the visions, and there is not even a dialog between Amos and his God to suggest a debate or the possibility of a reprieve from divine judgment. The text doesn't say for certain, but the “altar” in question in 9:1 is probably the altar at Bethel, over which Amos has pronounced judgment before in this book (see 3:14, 4:4, 5:5, and the confrontation with Amaziah at Bethel in 7:10-17). Again, Bethel stands out as a center of political and religious power in Israel, and Amos' central concern throughout the book here has been the way that the wealthy and the powerful have become calloused and indifferent to the needs of others within their society, all while using their religion as a pretense to claim immunity from God's judgment on their actions. Others of the prophets would attack religious sites in Israel for their association with pagan gods. And while there are a few places that Amos hints at this kind of concern (see, for example, 5:25-27 and possibly 8:14), for him, power, wealth, and comfortability are the false gods Israel has turned to primarily.

The basic sense of this passage may not be all that new—the word is one of judgment against the nation of Israel as a whole. But what *is* new—or at least in its sharpest focus here—is the intensity of the judgment that Amos sees coming at YHWH's hand. The basic sense is that God's judgment of Israel will be both *intentional* and *relentless*. Amos wants to make it clear yet again that when disaster befalls Israel, it will not be accidental or random, much less the action of a stronger, foreign god over Israel's God. Rather, Amos insists that the God who still calls Israel “my people,” (see for example 7:8, 8:2) will also be the God who brings about the disaster. But it is once again important to emphasize that Amos doesn't announce this message without a context or reason. He sees his society as one that has become so consumed with

consuming, so entranced and enchanted with its own accomplishments and luxuries and even its religious, that it thinks itself invincible. There is a sense of insulation from the problems of others, a deafness to the cries of the poor in their midst, that Amos cannot allow. The people whom Amos now addresses are the very ones who in 9:10 say, “Evil shall not overtake or meet us.” That is, Amos’ audience here are those people convinced that their actions carry no consequences and that they have a golden parachute even if disaster strikes others. And against those people, Amos insists that God will not rest until the entire nation of Israel is brought to justice.

Especially powerful in this passage is the language of God searching out the people to bring judgment on them. There is a great deal of poetic imagery going on here—in 9:2-3, we have two pair of parallelisms that suggest the universal scope of God’s action. The people can try to hide in the realm of the dead, “Sheol,” generally described in the Old Testament as under the ground, or climb up to the heights of the heavens—but YHWH will find them. The same sense happens in 9:3 with the contrast of the mountaintops at Carmel and the bottom of the sea—again, there is no place too far or too remote for God to find the people.

If this kind of language sounds strangely familiar—it is; in Psalm 139, the speaker asks, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” and then declares that God would be present in heaven, in *Sheol*, and at the farthest reaches in any direction. In the psalm, this language is spoken in awe, but generally with a positive sense of God’s presence in all situations. But for Amos, the same idea means that no one can escape from God—there are no golden parachutes to be found. For Amos, this all comes to a climax with 9:4’s announcement that even in captivity, even in exile, God will relentlessly pursue Israel. And then, Amos speaks the chillingly final-sounding words, “I will fix my eyes on them for

harm and not for good.” Ruled out for Amos is that the judgment about to befall Israel will really happen for their immediate benefit. Perhaps Amos is thinking of the Joseph story in Genesis when the family of Jacob went to Egypt and Joseph concludes that the trickery of the brothers, which had been meant “for harm” had ultimately been used by God “for good.” Everything gets tied up nicely at the end of Genesis for everyone—but Amos sees that things are not so simple in the life of the nation of Israel in his day. Amos insists that death must come on the nation, and all false hopes must be shattered. Amos declares that God will not rest until the corporate entity of Israel is dead and buried in the grave.

There are probably few passages within the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures that surpass the sheer terror and dread of this one. The idea of the faithful, promise-keeping, gracious God Israel knew from its own history somehow become Israel’s own worst enemy is almost unthinkable. And if we are uncomfortable overhearing this word, a word not initially spoken to readers of 21st century America, we can only imagine how it was heard by those for whom it was first intended. Amos’ words shake everything they know and throw their worldviews into upheaval. But in some sense that is precisely what a prophet is meant to do. The old line about prophetic speech (even prophetic speech today) is that it needs to ‘*comfort the afflicted*’ as well as to ‘*afflict the comfortable*.’ Amos’ diagnosis is that Israel is comfortable, and so his words must afflict them. He has repeatedly characterized the people of his place and time as indifferent, “not grieved at the ruin of Joseph.” The context is important—the complacency of the society in which Amos finds himself compels him to announce a word of judgment and to let that word be as harsh and jagged and painful as it needs to be to afflict this comfortable people.

That said, it is important to remember that contexts can and do change. For the psalmist who is threatened

by enemies (139:19-22), it is a comfort to consider that God is ever-present in all situations, even though Amos uses this same idea to arrive at an opposite conclusion. And even Amos' declaration of God acting "for harm and not for good" *before* the death of the nation is not the last word—other prophets, living in the midst of exile and its tragedy, saw a new act of God on the other side of death. Jeremiah, for one, addressed the exiles with the word from YHWH that "surely I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare *and not for harm*" (Jer. 29:11). The context of each is important. And just because Amos does not foresee a word of hope (yet?) whereas later prophets did, it does not mean that Amos was wrong about what God's action and intent was. For Amos, the only word the people could hear was the "No" of God—or rather, the people were so consumed with saying their own "yes" to themselves and their own ways that a "Yes" from God would be lost. First, the "No" of God would have to break their illusions to pieces.

-v.5-6—This is the last of the three hymn-like fragments (the first two were in 4:13 and 5:8-9). All three have similar language stressing God's power over creation and centering on the refrain, "The LORD is his name." We had mentioned earlier that it's hard to know whether Amos was the one to put these where they stand now or whether some later arranger thought they fit well at these climactic moments. But in some ways, these passages are very fitting with Amos' message in that they stress God as creator of the *whole* universe (not just as Israel's pet genie) and God as transcendent—unable to be tamed or domesticated. And all three of these hymn passages seem to come just as God threatens a personal, intense, almost "face-to-face" encounter with the people. For one last time, Amos turns the people's claims around—the God whom they celebrated as all-powerful (and whom they assumed used that power to reinforce the *status quo* in Israel) would turn around and unleash that power to undo the unjust ways of the nation.

Amos 9:7-10—The Lord of the Nations

❖The Text (NRSV)

⁷Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the LORD.

Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?

⁸The eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth --except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob, says the LORD.

⁹For lo, I will command, and shake the house of Israel among all the nations as one shakes with a sieve, but no pebble shall fall to the ground.

¹⁰All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, "Evil shall not overtake or meet us."

❖What's going on here?

-v.7-8— Amos makes a very daring move here in these two verses: he suggests—no, he declares—that God is intimately involved in the histories and welfare of *all* nations and peoples, not just Israel's. The controversial part of that notion was not the idea that Israel's God was *powerful* enough to be the Lord of the world, for surely the conventional wisdom was that God had intervened powerfully against and through other nations to help Israel out in the past (the Exodus is a good example here). No, the bold move of Amos here is to say that God's *compassion* and *concern* were big enough to encompass other nations. Israel is compared to the Cushites (the NRSV reads "Ethiopians"—Cush was the ancient name of a region south of Egypt in Africa) first in 9:7. This is not meant as an ethnic slur against the people of Ethiopia, but rather to say that God sees them on equal terms. Some scholars suggest that the idea is meant to suggest strangeness—since the ways and appearance of people from this part of Africa were so different from Hebrew ways, and since the Israelites might have only seen Ethiopians as foreign

dignitaries, travelers, or slaves, they would have been perceived as strange and alien. Of course, the power of this image is that Israel, who is *supposed* to be close with God and to be the very beacon of light shining God's ways and character to the world, who in fact is *supposed* to be the very child of God, has become just as foreign and alien to YHWH by its ways of living. God and nation here have become estranged. Whether or not Amos exactly intends this idea, at the very least 9:7 declares that God views Israel on the same terms as other, distant nations.

To underscore this radical idea, Amos pushes on to suggest that God not only has a generic concern for nations, but also plays a role in guiding their histories. Amos hold onto the tradition that Israel was brought up from Egypt by YHWH in a defining and gracious act, but also says that this same God, Israel's covenant God, had accomplished similar acts of deliverance for the Philistines and the Arameans. And the kicker of all of this is in recognizing that both of those nations, the Philistines and the Arameans, were traditionally seen as long-standing enemies of Israel. God has not only had a providential hand to play in the life story of Israel, but also in the lives of Israel's enemies. God, Amos says, is bigger than Israel's expectations.

9:8, then, opens with a broad announcement of divine policy: *whatever* nation is a sinful nation will meet God's judgment, regardless of their claims on God or relationship with God. The second half of this verse, though, seems to undercut and confuse the first half. For some reason, Israel, the "house of Jacob," will not be destroyed completely? This seems to fly in the face of all of Amos' message. For that reason, there are lots of suggestions by scholars that this must be the work of a later editor put in in light of the remnant after the exile. Someone from Judah who returned from Babylon may have wanted to make it clear that God was not done with the family of Jacob even after the North was conquered by the Assyrians and the South was defeated by Babylon. And while that possibility certainly could fit the evidence, it might

have also referred to the southern kingdom, Judah, not being conquered when Israel was conquered—Amos might have meant to say that the judgment that would come to the North would not (yet) mean the end of the South. Or, is it possible—if even only *just* possible—that Amos might have seen a hint of a glimmer of a glimpse of possibility on the other side of exile? Amos has always been one to overturn our expectations, to tell us that our assumptions about what God *can* and *cannot* do are not as solid and fixed as we think. So it might just be possible that Amos spoke of a life *after* death for Israel, even if he could only just guess at what that might mean, even if he himself wasn't sure what he meant in saying it.

-v.9-10—Returning to the image of shaking foundations (see back to 9:1), Amos picks up with his assault on the ways of Israel. Here, the shaking is like a sieve, separating out all the good grain, which falls through the mesh, while the trash and chaff and stones/pebbles are caught. Again, the image is terrifying, as it threatens violence and death for God's own people. But there is also something about the logic of the metaphor that seems aimed at a good purpose—the purpose of the sieve's shaking is ultimately to have grain to make flour and bread with, even though it does mean that the grain itself has to die. In some ways, this evokes the plumb line image in 7:7-9, which is used in construction—almost hinting that although the building of Israel must be knocked down, it is because God is clearing the way to make something new. Now, it is important to remember that Amos says none of those things, and he does not make those connections—he doesn't say here that God is going to prosper and rebuild Israel after the great shaking. He cannot without letting Israel's powerful slip back into their complacency to assume that God really does approve of their ways and their affluence after all. But the images used here at least *allow* that the afflicted may find some comfort from God after God has afflicted the comfortable—that life may wait after death.

Connections: Providence, Promise, and the Present

-Amos clearly assumes that God has a hand in all of life. While the religious wisdom of his day would have agreed that God was involved in the good fortunes of *Israel*, Amos goes further in two directions, saying both that the looming judgment was coming at God's hand and that the good fortunes and even deliverance of other nations was also the word of this one true God. How do we make sense of that kind of theological claim in our lives and world? For example:

- Does Amos give us free license here to read every good or bad event in world history as decreed by God? Who decides what events are God's doing and which are not?
- Is it right to see everything detail of my life as a gift or punishment from God? Is a good parking space a blessing from this God? Is a stain on my tie divine retribution? On the other hand, can I ever be certain that any event is *not* within the design of God, or at least that God may yet use any event for some purpose? What informs your answers?

-Since Amos seems to suggest that God is concerned for the well-being of *all* nations (see not only 9:7ff, but also all of chapter 1-2), how might we be led to think about our lives and our world differently?

- As citizens of one particular nation, what weight should the "national interest" have in the way the U.S. is involved in the world-at-large? What might that mean for how we pursue our defense? What might that mean for how we support labor—should we be concerned only for people who work within our country? Do we have an obligation to workers in other countries as well?
- There has been a great deal of debate in the last decades over whether the United States is a "Christian" nation and what that means for domestic and foreign policy decisions. Regardless of whether a majority of Americans come from a Christian background, or even whether the Founders were Christians or not, does status as "Christian" give us any special privilege over other nations? What might Amos say to that kind of thinking in light of how he views the "special" status of Israel?
- What might Amos' comparison between Israel and the Ethiopian, Aramean, and Philistine peoples suggest for talks between the present day nation of Israel and the Palestinian people?