Pentecost 23 Proper 27

November 8, 2020

Amos 5:18-24

 When I was a junior in high school, we spent a morning doing career assessment tests. There were questions about what we were interested in doing followed by ones that measured our skills in a variety of areas.

 I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do yet, so I decided it was easier to rule out jobs that I knew I wasn’t interested in, like mechanical engineer, neurosurgeon, or really anything that involved math or science, and then choose from the remaining ones.

 If they had these kinds of tests 3000 years ago, I’m pretty sure there would have been few people who would have selected “prophet” as the career to which they aspired.

 Prophets had tough messages to deliver. To be a faithful prophet for God probably meant you weren’t terribly popular, particularly with those in power. It takes a special leader to be willing to listen to the kind of criticism that the prophets delivered; to listen to it and act accordingly was even harder.

 3000 years later, the message of the prophets is just as hard to hear as it was then, but just as applicable to our lives as it was to the lives of the Israelites.

 In our reading today from Amos we hear some of the harshest words the prophets shared with the people.

 For us to be gathered for worship and hear the words, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies,” is shocking. The notion that God would reject the worship of the Israelites is hard to accept. And yet, that’s exactly what God is saying here.

 Why? What on earth would prompt God to reject the worship, offerings, and festivals that God instructed the people to do?

 Throughout the writings of Amos, the prophet makes it clear that the people were trusting too much, relying too much on their worship. Too many people were suffering, too many people were in need of justice, while others enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle and figured they were fine.

 So when the people declare that they look forward to the day of the Lord, the day the enemies of Israel will be vanquished, God basically says, “Not so fast, my friends.”

 What we have here is not a complete repudiation of their celebration of festivals or their offerings or their worship. It’s the reminder that there’s more to being the people of God than worship.

 In the translation *The Message*, verse 24 reads, “Do you know what I want? I want justice — oceans of it. I want fairness — rivers of it. That’s what I want.” The water metaphors tell us that God desires justice and fairness, justice and righteousness, to be abundant and life-giving, not just for some, but for all people.

 Worship and working for peace and justice are not an either/or. We are meant to do both.

 Worship is, particularly these days, a refuge for us. Through worship, we find needed comfort during uncertain and challenging times. But worship is not meant solely to provide comfort for us. It is meant to remind us of God’s love for us as much as it is meant to remind us of what God values and God’s invitation to join in the redemptive work God is up to in the world. Worship is meant to nourish and strengthen us so that we can go out into the world and practice the peace and love we have experience during worship.

 The Israelites had a tendency to forget that, and so do we.

 The Israelites were frustrated by the pressure from foreign powers that threatened their ability to flourish. They longed for God to come in and rescue them. They especially longed for God to punish their enemies and free them from the fear that was a constant presence in their lives.

 But God declared that the people needed to be mindful of their own behavior, too, and warned them that “the day of the Lord” they were looking for might not go the way they expected.

Over the course of this year, I’ve had an increasing number of people ask me if we’re living in end times, if the “day of the Lord” we read about in Amos is coming.

 I must admit I don’t have a good answer for this, primarily because God has not chosen to share with me the specifics of God’s plans for the end of life on earth as we know it. And, honestly, I’m not sure it’s a question we should be asking. Jesus is pretty clear that we have better things to do than trying to interpret signs so that we can predict the end of things.

 So often, when people talk about end times, it comes with the suggestion that it’s other people who need to get their act together, but I think it would be unwise for any of us to assume we are doing just fine and only other people need to worry.

The people Amos spoke to were pretty sure they were doing just fine, and it would be other people who needed to worry, other people who would experience God’s wrath. But it’s pretty clear from our reading today that God disagreed with their assessment.

While I firmly believe that we are unwise to trifle with God, fear of the Lord is not as much about being scared of God as it is about being in awe of God. Fear is not an effective way to bring people to lasting faith. Love does a much better job.

 Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is pretty clear about us not knowing when the Second Coming will happen, but that we should be prepared.

 A focus on predicting the end times can keep us from the work we’re meant to be doing on earth in the meantime. Throughout these next several weeks, as we move into Advent, we’re going to be hearing about our need to be prepared.

 What does being prepared look like?

 It means, as another prophet puts it, to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.[[1]](#footnote-1) It means practicing the fruit of the Spirit — patience, joy, mercy, love. It means looking out for those who are lonely, despairing, suffering, and oppressed, doing what we can with what we have to lift them up.

 It means promoting healthy relationships among people and in communities. It means looking for ways to come together and move past our differences. It means active concern for the well-being of others.

 And it means remembering that all of us are created in the image of God, and looking for God in the people around us.

 Let us pray: God you have created all people in your image and redeemed us through Jesus, your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through us to accomplish your purposes on earth. Amen.

1. Micah 6:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)