

Proper 11 (Yr C) - Amos 8: 1-12

Disturbing the Peace

Consolations and Desolations

- At the close of every weekly meeting of the Men's Group, we go around the table and mention our Highs and Lows, our Consolations and Desolations (as Ignatius of Loyola called them); those places where we found God and those in which God seems to be absent.
- If the Men's Group had a spiritual director, he or she might help us keep in mind that sometimes what we see as consolations are, in fact desolations
 - And that is what we find in the Book of Amos:
 - The wealthy people of Bethel of the Kingdom of Israel were certain that they were living in in a time of Consolation (that God was blessing their lives), when, in reality, as Amos tells them, what they are living in is a time of utter and complete desolation.
 - And yet, in this desolation, there is some hope, and we'll see that later on.
- But first, let's look at Amos, the prophet himself and his times, and that ought to give us a more clearer understanding of how the people of Bethel mixed up their consolations and desolations.

Amos of Tekoa

- Amos was a shepherd and fig grower from Tekoa, a small town 5 miles south of Jerusalem, that sat upon a hill that rose above two valleys that descend to the Dead Sea.
 - Tekoa was a part of the southern Kingdom of Judah, but the marketplace for the wool from sheep of Amos was in Bethel a 2 ½ days journey away in the northern Kingdom of Israel.
- In the 8th century B.C.E, it was a time of seeming consolation for the wealthy in the Kingdom of Israel
 - Their usual enemies were otherwise occupied:
 - The Kingdom of Egypt was in decline and the mighty Assyrian army had withdrawn to the north to take care of other problems.
- But when Amos arrived in Bethel, he didn't like what he saw:
 - The most fundamental problem, as Amos saw it, was that as the prosperous people of Bethel looked at the state of the union, they were suffering from the misconception that everything seemed to be working just swell.
 - According to the wealthy residents of Bethel, peace and tranquility prevailed. Life couldn't be much better. God must be blessing their way of life.
 - But as Amos looked at Bethel, what he saw was that the rich were few in number and prospering mightily while the poor were great in number, and they were suffering mightily.

- Just the fact of they're being rich wasn't the problem for Amos; the problem was how they got that way:

You [he says to the wealthy residents of Bethel] enslave the poor for a debt of one piece of silver or for a pair of sandals. (8:6)

You trample down the needy (v4)

You can't wait for the Sabbath to end, so you can get back to cheating the helpless.(v5)

- What made the situation even worse was that even if the people of Bethel might have admitted that they got their wealth through devious means, that didn't really matter, because they were certain that

- God would forgive them because they continued to make the proper sacrifices at the appointed seasons, and

- God would overlook a few minor transgressions because they made the proper prayers.

- And as a reward for their piety, God would continue to bless them with wealth and happiness

- On the other hand, Amos said that God was not unimpressed with the religious piety of the wealthy. God's response to this was to say (in Chapter 5):

I hate all your show and pretense—

the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies,

Away with your noisy hymns of praise!

I will not listen to the music of your harps

Instead, I want to see *justice* roll down like waters,
and a river of *righteousness* like an ever-flowing stream.
(5:24)

- The main reason that the rich of Bethel allowed themselves to be fooled into thinking that consolation was really desolation

- was because they forgot that God's faithfulness, God's Covenant, was conditioned on the degree of
 - their mercy toward the weak
 - and their justice for the poor and oppressed.
- Where mercy was lacking, God saw disaster.

Ripe for Punishment

- A little play on words (in Hebrew) in the beginning of the reading makes clear the confusion about the seeming consolation the people of Bethel live in and the desolation to come.
- God shows Amos a vision and asks what Amos sees.
 - A basket of summer fruit (ripe fruit)," says Amos...which is exactly how the Israelites see their situation. Nothing but the best for them...
 - But that phrase "summer fruit" in Hebrew is very close to the phrase, "the end has come" or "overly ripe, or "ripe for punishment."
 - The end has come for the people of Israel, they were ripe for punishment:
 - And Amos really spells it out for them... He says...

The Day of the Lord

- The Day of the Lord is coming, says the Lord God
- You elite of Israel may think that the life you are living now is the good life;

- You may consider that you are being justly rewarded for your love of God and for your prayers and piety;
- You may consider that this is the Way of the World; this the Natural Order of Things
- Well, let me tell you, God says, I can make your natural order change with the snap of a finger.
 - I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth while it is still day.
 - Don't even talk to me about the natural order of things.
- Here's the natural order of things for you from now on:
 - Celebrations will be turned into mourning
 - Singing will be turned to weeping
 - You will wear funeral clothes and shave your heads to show your sorrow, as if your only son had died.
 - That will be the new world order for you; desolation will be the natural order of things.

Persona Non Grata

- Well, surprisingly enough, the King and the elite of Israel did not welcome the message of Amos
 - Amaziah, the priest of the shrine at Bethel, told King Jeroboam that Amos was predicting that the King would soon be killed and that the people would be sent away into exile.
 - The King, being sensitive to criticism, told Amaziah to kick Amos out of the country;

- If Amos didn't like it in Israel, he could go back to Judah, back to the country he came from
- So Amos was declared persona non grata (as they say in the diplomatic world) and returned to Judah, to his sheep and his fig trees.

The Coming Judgment

- Nevertheless, he persisted.
 - He persisted in delivering his unwelcome prophecies of death, of exile and of destruction for those who disregarded God's Covenant.
- Amos continued to preach that "Judgment was coming."
 - And in 10 years, Israel's economy collapsed, the government was overthrown, the religious rituals disappeared.
 - The invading armies of the Assyrians was the cleansing tool that God used to change the natural order of things.
- At the end, all that supposed peace and prosperity was over.
 - Israel was put into exile:
 - No population, no economy, no sacrifices, no religion.
 - It was all burned to the ground.
 - The greed that resided at the center of their lives had turned into ashes.
- The Assyrian army had eradicated the Kingdom of Israel and the tribes of the Northern Kingdom became known as the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel.

The Consolation

- So where, one might ask, is the consolation in all this? Where do we see God?
- We, and the people of the Kingdom of Judah, have the first hint of that Consolation in the name of the place where Amos lived: Tekoa
- Tekoa, as all the people of Israel and Judah knew, was the home of the unnamed woman who reconciled David and his estranged son, Absalom, who had entered into a plot to remove David from the throne.
 - She encouraged David to be reconciled with Absalom as God is reconciled with his people.
 - God does not just sweep life away;” she tells David, “instead he devises ways to bring us back when we have been separated from him.” (2 Sam 14:14)
 - In the same way, she tells David, you are obliged to allow your son back into your presence and good graces.
- In much the same way, God was reconciled with those who escaped the Assyrian onslaught and made their way to the Kingdom of Judah in the South,
 - These refugees began to understand that although the Assyrian Army had removed what they thought was the center of their lives, something much better remained.

God would be reconciled to his people when they understood that

- Even though the money had disappeared, God had not.

- Even though the people and government had been scattered throughout the Assyrian Empire
- And even though religious ceremonies at Bethel were wiped out, God was not wiped out. God was still present.
 - God remained.
- God had returned to his rightful place at the center of their lives

The Natural Order of Things

- Sadly, however, the story of Israel has been often repeated throughout history.
 - Although I remain an optimist and I see the progress of slow and gradual improvement in the nations of the world...
 - I don't have a completely melioristic view of the world, that one that believes the world is being made better by human effort
 - It seems that, left to their own devices
 - Societies have a tendency to become unfair in their economy, unashamed in their morality, and unjust in their dealings with others.
 - As people become rich by trampling on the backs of others, they see this as the natural order of things
- But God sees it, and God insists on changing it; God will darken the earth while empires believe the light will shine continually on them.
- Judgment sooner or later overtakes us

- Judgment wakes us up to God.
 - Judgment wakes us up to real worship of God
 - Judgment wakes us up to bring justice for all.
 - Judgment wakes us up to show mercy.
- When judgment has done its work, God returns to God's rightful place, at the center of our lives, where God rightfully belongs.