

Moved by compassion.

Amos 7:7-17; Luke 10:25-37

These days, it might feel as though we are living in a permanent state of anxiety and fear. The world, it could be said, is full of fear. With all the gun violence recently, the school shootings, the anti-abortion legislation in the States, the wars overseas...it's understandable that life seems fragile to us. Add to that the anxiety over COVID, the economic implications of inflation, the cost of living, and the realization that what we once had will never be the same again. It's no wonder that people are becoming at times defensive, withdrawn, suspicious, even cranky.

The Christian Church is also not unlike the world and full of fear as well. Fear that the churches will shut down. Fear that there will not be enough people or even enough ministers. It will be safe to say that we are surrounded and live in this state of fear. When we live in a state of fear, though, we can become blind to the truth. At times, Christians have been known to blindly trust in grace to fix everything. When that happens, we forget that grace is free, but it still comes with a cost.

But we are a people of faith. Do we not trust in God? We proclaim in the United Church of Canada that we are called together by Christ as a community of *broken but hopeful believers*. Loving what he loved, living what he taught, and striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place. It says many times in the Bible that Jesus said to the people, "Do not be afraid; I go before you always. Come, follow me, and I will give you rest." Have we, like the people that Amos prophesized to, lost our way? Have we gone out of alignment with what God is calling us to do?

Let's explore this prophet Amos a bit more. Who is Amos? Amos is one of the earliest prophets of Israel, whose sayings were actually collected. His time as a prophet was short in comparison with the prophet Isaiah or Ezekiel, and so in the Bible, Amos is considered one of the minor prophets. We don't know much about Amos, but we do know that he came from Tekoa, a town in the southern hill

country of south Bethlehem. He was a shepherd, as he proclaimed in the scripture today, and he was also a dresser of sycamore trees. I was curious; I wanted to know what that was, so I looked it up. A dresser of sycamore trees is an activity which piercing the sycamore fruit to allow for proper ripening.

Amos was called suddenly out of the fields, where he was tending to his flocks and told by God to go and prophesize to the people of Israel. Amos was called to do something that most of us wouldn't even dare to think about. He was called by God to challenge the people, to see how they had gone off-course, how they had succumb to the status quo. One theologian named William Jenkins points out that "Amos forces his audience to decide how God's grace meets stubborn injustice."¹ Amos was called to speak the truth, and it should be noted that "the words of judgement did not come from his personal conviction, but rather from a divine external summons".²

We hear the image of a *plumb line* used by God. A plumb line is a heavy weight hung on a string, used in construction to determine where centre is on a vertical structure. It's also used to measure depth. A plumb line is also defined as an imaginary line regarded as directed exactly towards the Earth's centre of gravity. The priest, Amaziah, is clearly not on centre in this passage. His response to Amos was to tell him, "Go away. Go prophesize somewhere else. We can't handle what you're going to say to us. And really, this is Jeroboam's kingdom – not God's kingdom. So yeah. You just go over there. Leave us alone, and we'll be fine." It was clear that Amaziah was no longer serving God but was serving King Jeroboam.

Amos lived and delivered his message in a time of widespread national prosperity. Personal wealth was frequently acquired by exploiting the poor and the powerless. "Amos saw the cheating, the bribery, the moral laxity, which accommodated the outward prosperity as an indication of the society's internal decline."³ Amaziah, upon hearing the words of Amos, reacted as most of us would, for he felt caught out. In doing so, he was probably very aware that he was doing something he shouldn't. Through Amos, God was calling the people back. God was calling the people back to centre, and the centre is God. What God showed Amos was the plumb line. God said: "See, I am setting a plumb line in the

¹ Willis Jenkins, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 222.

² _____, p. 224.

³ Helen Hobbs, *The Prophet Speaks*, (Etobicoke: The United Church Publishing House, 1990), p. 27.

midst of my people of Israel, and I will never pass over them again. I will never again pass by them.”

As faithful followers of Christ, what are we being called to do? We are being called to remain humbly loyal to truth and to God: the Source of all that is. We are called to live our lives according to God’s Word, and we are called to live in hope, even in a world that is living in fear. We are called to go against the status quo. We are called to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil. To share generously and extend hospitality, and to forgive and ask for forgiveness. We are being called to follow Jesus. So hear these words of God again: “I will never again pass them by.” We can trust that we are not alone.

The story of the Good Samaritan is one that is probably more familiar to people. Where we hear of how there were several people, who we would’ve expected to stop and help the person who had been beaten and robbed, but instead they walked and passed by. This is an example of how easy it is for people to go off course. How easy it is to get distracted by our own matters, or to be motivated by fear, rather than compassion.

Who are off centre? We go back to Amos: it’s the people who veer away from what God is calling them to do. In Jesus’ parable, he shares with the lawyer, it is the Samaritan who does not pass by. Who stops and is drawn in and is moved by compassion. The spirit of God poured into his heart, making him cross over to where the man lay. Upon finding him, he healed him, gave him food and shelter.

Both of these passages are calling us to awaken the spirit of compassion in our hearts. God is calling us back to God. It is the lawyer’s question that calls us back today. When he asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”, Jesus invites the lawyer to tell him. The lawyer’s answer is: “To love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all our strength and all your mind, *and* your neighbour as yourself.” It is important to reflect on our motivations. What motivates us to answer God’s call. Are we living lives that answers God’s call? And as a faith community, are we acting as the Samaritan did? How can we, as a faith community, bring society to a place where show compassion and care, rather than judgement and suspicion? Like last week, when we explored whose voice we are listening to, today we explore who’s in our heart, who’s at the centre of our lives. If we are listening to God’s voice and we are living our lives with God at the heart, we need not fear. We need not turn away. We are being called to live a life

worthy of God, and so I want to share a quote from Alan J. Roxsburgh, who writes:

“If you want to discover and discern what God is up to in this world, stop trying to answer the question from within the walls of your church. Like strangers in need of hospitality who have left their baggage behind, enter the neighbourhoods and communities where we live. Sit at the table of the other, and there you may begin to hear what God is doing.”⁴

So let us pray:

“God of all Creation, give us vision to see the true need of one another. Give us the courage to link beyond the comfort of what we know and understand, so that we might discover and come to love the diversity of your Creation. Amen.”⁵

⁴ Alan J. Roxsburgh in Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen’s, *The New Parish*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014), p. 165.

⁵ _____, p. 163.