

“A Hard Truth”
Amos 6:1-14
June 25, 2006

Text Comment

- v.1 This is not the first time, as we have seen, that Amos depicts Israel as serenely confident of God’s approval without reason to be so. Israel is recklessly at ease, insensible to the real danger of her situation. Zion, literally a synonym for Jerusalem, seems to be a reference to Judah, the southern kingdom, as Samaria is to the northern. Remember, in chapter 2 Amos preached an oracle of judgment against Judah. Again, the following verses will make clear that the northern kingdom remains the primary focus of Amos’ condemnation. In both cases, the capitals are definitely metonymies for the two nations, as the royal capital that stands for the nation as a whole. We are talking about the capital, a center of political power and conspicuous wealth. It is the influential and the rich who live and work in the capital whose complacency and whose judgment is to be described in the following verses.
- v.2 The point is that Israel thinks herself a great nation, indeed, the foremost nation, as we read in v. 1, but she is no greater than these other states were that now lie under Israel’s control. Let Israel take warning: nations with delusions of grandeur have a way of being put in their place.
- v.3 They deliberately blind themselves to the coming catastrophe, which they could easily predict if only they believed what the Lord had told them in his Word, and they prepare the way for a reign of terror. There would be a great deal of such political terror in the years that followed the death of Jeroboam II. In the ten years after his death Israel had five kings, three of whom seized power in political coups. [Motyer, 142] We read in 2 Kings 15:16 of the savage treatment of the people by one of these men, Menahem, in his mad rush for power.
- v.6 We have in these verses a revealing account of the decadence of the wealthy in Israel. They eat their meals reclining on expensive couches – the first mention of reclining at table in the Bible – and consume choice cuts of meat. The average Israelite may have eaten meat only three times a year, the poor even less. They are lazy gluttons. They spend large amounts of time in frivolous pursuits. In those days, only the rich could afford to spend lots of time playing and listening to music. The reference to David suggests that they thought of themselves and lived as if they were kings. And they give themselves to expensive stimulations: they drank so much wine they didn’t bother to pour it first into cups, they took it straight from the bottle as it were and they used only the finest oils to pour on their bodies. The anointing of the body was common in the ANE, especially after bathing. It soothed the skin and served as a protection against both heat and lice. The rich added expensive spices and perfumes to the oil. They spent large amounts of money even on personal hygiene. *But Israel’s defection from Yahweh’s covenant troubled them not at all!*

- v.7 The wealthy who have prospered the most in their rebellion against the Lord will be the first to suffer the Assyrian wrath. That is always the conqueror's way, of course: cut off the head and the body will fall easily enough.
- v.8 Israel's military self-confidence will be turned into a cruel joke, like France's Maginot Line at the beginning of World War II.
- v.9 The picture is that of ten men who have survived the terrors of the siege so far and are found taking refuge together in a single home – probably a large home, so Amos is still thinking about the wealthy of Samaria – but they too will die, probably of disease, a feature of siege warfare, as suggested in the next verse.
- v.10 The sense seems to be that the few remaining Israelites will have gathered by this time that Yahweh has become their enemy and they will want him to leave, not stay. They hope Yahweh will consider the judgment sufficient and, if they keep a low profile, perhaps he will not bring upon them any further punishment.

By the way, though it is possible that the bodies were to be burned because of the contagion of the plague raging in the besieged city – Israelite's normally buried their dead – it is possible however that the reference is to the burning of spices for the dead. [Driver, 197; cf. Robert Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, at 1 Samuel 31:12]

- v.13 Two supremely unnatural and absurd activities – running horses up cliffs or plowing the rocks (or the sea, either reading is possible) with oxen – serve as analogies to point out how preposterous and unreasonable Israel's behavior has been. Defying the Lord successfully is just that impossible.
- v.14 To a nation reveling in its power comes a promise of its brutal conquest by another power. At this moment, during Jeroboam's reign, the other nations of the region were relatively impotent, including Egypt and Assyria. In that vacuum Israel's power seemed impressive. All of that would change very quickly. Lebo Hamath, mentioned in v. 2, was Israel's northernmost boundary and the Wadi Arabah her southernmost. So the description is of total defeat.

Chapter 6 of Amos is a study in the contrast between the people's unknowing complacency, pride, and self-confidence and the divine retribution about to befall them. It is a reinforcement of Amos' message so far, viz. the fearful catastrophe of Israel's religious error. These people were sincere, as people measure sincerity. They practiced their religion seriously. But their religious life was a sincere belief in a god of their own devising. Sincerity had replaced theology and ceremony had replaced ethics. Their religion did not arise from who God actually is and what he had required of man. [Motyer, 141]

But along the way, we are given insight into a hard but very important fact of human life and of the judgment of the Lord. What we have here in Amos 6 – indicated especially in v. 11 – is a reality to which the Bible frequently bears witness, even if it is not, precisely, what we might call a teaching or doctrine of Holy Scripture. We have before us, in other words, what we might call

an exercise in spiritual theology: a drawing of important lessons for life from the materials of Scripture teaching and, especially, the Bible's narratives, its historical accounts. One comes to everything sooner or later and this is an important truth that we are to consider this morning. It is not a point very often raised in Christian preaching, but it bears profoundly on your life and mine precisely because of the kind of people we are and the place we occupy today in our society.

It is a reminder, once again, by the way of the perpetual relevance of the Bible. Human life is not different – not in any fundamental way – from what it was in the 8th century B.C. The behavior of human beings and the principles of life in a world created by the living God but fallen into sin are today what they were then.

I was reminded of this in an interesting way reading a biography the other day. This prominent Christian was described by his biographer as having done in his youth all the things that adults deplore in young people: he wasted time and money; he was preoccupied with his appearance and his clothes had to be worn according to the latest fashion; he kept company with the wrong crowd; he was overly interested in girls; and he loved subversive music. It does sound familiar doesn't it? You parents are nodding your heads. But who was the young rebel of whom we are given this all too familiar description? It was Francis of Assisi as a teenager, in the opening years of the 13th century! The subversive music was the love songs, the *chansons* then popular in France! [L. Cunningham, *Francis of Assisi*, 6-7] Human life is today what it has always been and the realities of life and the realities of God's judgment of human life are the same today as they were in the middle of 13th century and the 8th century B.C. And what is that reality? Well, we find it here in Amos 6.

You may remember that our *Westminster Confession of Faith*, in its great opening chapter on Holy Scripture, says that

“The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture...*”

Well, this morning we are taking up a truth that is *set down in Scripture* after a fashion, but more often is to be *deduced* from its teaching in many places. And that truth is the truth Amos draws our attention to, almost by the by, in v. 11 when he says that the Lord will smash the great house into pieces *and the small house into bits*.

Against the run of the chapter – which is all about the sins of the wealthy and powerful and their just punishment – we are told that the poor and those lacking influence will likewise suffer the judgment and wrath of God. There is, we might say, a solidarity of the lower classes of society with its elite. Not everyone in Israel was a rebel against God and a breaker of his covenant. Amos has already spoken of a remnant of real believers among the apostate nation. But most of the people had no faith in Yahweh and were living lives that were an offense to him. And most of those people *were not rich and powerful*. The rich and powerful always represent a small proportion of the whole. But, however small a percentage of the population, they usually represent the society as a whole because they shape it so profoundly. The fact of the matter is that the rot in Israel went right down to the bottom and infected even the lowest rungs of society.

The poor were bad as were the rich. If the rich were more guilty – according to the principle that the Lord requires more of the one to whom he gives much – that did not mean that the poor were, for that reason, *not guilty*. Amos talks about the rich, he sarcastically portrays their life of excess and luxury, he enumerates their sins, but he never suggests that only the rich were spiritually corrupt. The rich rather represent and publicly demonstrate the corruption of the whole people. Their sins stand for the sins of the whole.

Nowadays, the prophecy of Amos is very likely to be referred to in evangelical preaching and writing primarily as a part of Scripture designed to sensitize the conscience of evangelical Christians toward the poor. Amos is foremost among the prophets for excoriating the rich for their mistreatment and oppression of the poor. In 2:7 we read of Israel's rich and powerful that "They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed." In 4:1 we read of the wealthy Israelite women who oppress the poor. In 5:11-12 we read again, "You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain" and "you deprive the poor of justice in the courts." In 8:4-6, once again, "Here this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land.... buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals..."

And a sensitive conscience with regard to the treatment of the poor is absolutely essential for a Christian. We read, earlier in our service this morning, the same demand for Christian sensitivity toward the poor in James 2. It is a fundamental betrayal of the gospel of Christ – grace extended in love to the needy and the helpless – for Christians to ignore, still more to despise the poor. It is the kind of favoritism that God hates and the kind that, had he shown it to us, not one of us would have been saved. It is not for nothing that the poor receive special attention in the Word and the Law of God, that God's people are commanded many times to treat the poor with respect, faithfulness, and generosity. It is not for nothing that, on the Judgment Day, our lives will be measured – in some significant part – by how we extended ourselves on behalf of the poor and needy. Amos is rightly appealed to as confirming all of this in the most solemn tones imaginable. God's wrath will be visited upon those who mistreat the poor. But that is not by any means the only lesson to take away from Amos; it is not the only thing to take away from Amos' statements about God taking offense at the mistreatment of the poor. *For the fact is, the poor were also the objects of God's wrath.*

To say that the poor were oppressed, you see, is not by any means to say that the poor were righteous themselves. They were not, by and large, and the furious judgments of the Lord fell upon them as they did upon the wealthy. The small house was leveled as well as the stone mansion; the couches inlaid with ivory were looted by the conquerors, but the frayed rugs upon which the poor sat to eat their meatless meals on the floor of their huts were just as surely buried in the rubble of Israel's broken cities. The poor were killed and carried off into captivity as well as the rich and powerful.

There was in the 1970s and 1980s, in the movement known as Liberation Theology – a form of Christian theological and ethical reflection heavily influenced by Marxism – an assumption that the oppression of the poor by wealthy and powerful persons or by capitalist economic structures rendered the poor righteous by default. When the liberation theologians quoted the Lord's beatitudes, "blessed are the poor" they understood him to mean, blessed are the economically

deprived, not, as surely is right, blessed are those who are poor in spirit, humble before God and man, meek in the knowledge of their own sinfulness and dependence upon God's mercy. In the catechism of liberation theology, salvation was guaranteed to the oppressed of the earth. *But oppression in itself does not make anyone righteous!* In fact, history shows us that oppression usually does *not* make people righteous. It is much more likely to corrupt them and harden them in all the wrong ways. It is, in fact, one of the worst things about injustice that it so regularly corrupts its victims. "Trouble," Luther said, "can make a man bitter or better." And, alas, history shows it usually makes him bitter. This is hard to face in certain ways – we feel that the poor should be compensated for the oppression that they suffered, for the injustice that they have had to endure – but it is reality nonetheless. The little house is crushed together with the mansion and the peasants were carried off as well as the land owners.

We have a new connection in this congregation with the nation of Peru. If Peru has taught us anything over the past half-century – I am speaking of the Shining Path's reign of terror – it is that the only thing worse than oppression by the rich is oppression by the poor! The poor who made up that movement had genuine grievances. Of that there can be no doubt. They were objects of centuries of mistreatment and inhumanity. But that did not make them righteous. It made them bitterly cruel and utterly inhumane in their pursuit of their vengeance and of that earthly power and pleasure for which they had so long envied the rich.

What is absolutely clear in Amos – as often elsewhere in the Bible – is that the whole of Israel was judged for her sins, not just the rich. The rich are pointed out, their sins excoriated, but not because they were the only sinners among the people, but because it was *their* sinning that shaped and gave a particular character to the sin of Israel as a whole. They *stood for Israel's rebellion* because they led it! As Jeremiah would have put it, "the elite culture is in rebellion against God and his covenant, *but the people love it this way!*"

The elite culture in Germany in the 1930s determined the direction of that country, but, alas, it cannot be said that that direction was manfully resisted by everyone else. The people did not clamor for the elimination of the Jews and demand it until an unwilling government finally acquiesced. It was the reverse, of course. The elite made their plans and the people went along. Far, far too many – most indeed – went along and became complicit in the crimes of that nation. It was not the large middle of American population that sought and demanded social change in the 1960s and 70s, but America's population adapted itself to the new world of marital, sexual, and reproductive ethics easily enough. It was not the ordinary American citizen who created the porn culture; but it is the ordinary American citizen who now pays for it. It is not too much to say that America's poor, who have suffered from the sexual revolution more than any other segment of society, have nevertheless embraced it as enthusiastically as any other segment of society. It wasn't their idea and they don't enjoy it nearly as much as do the wealthy, but it has without question become their way of life.

And so it has often been in the church of God. Thinking of verse 10 and its "Hush! We must not mention the name of the Lord," the expression of fearful concern lest pronouncing the Lord's name might provoke a fresh outburst of his wrath upon Israel, I couldn't help but think of this past week's news. You may have seen the newspaper and internet stories on the *Presbyterian Church USA's* most recent General Assembly. In one action reported by the Associated Press,

the Assembly, while not mandating new language of address for God, allowed worship services to employ more gender-inclusive terminology for the Triune God. Instead of addressing him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they might try, for example, “Mother, Child, and Womb,” or “Lover, Beloved, and Love.” It is the elite culture of that church that is pushing this agenda. The Presbyterian pew is not demanding it. But nothing is so certain as that once the changes have been introduced and recommended by the church’s ministry and leadership, they will eventually be accepted meekly by the largest part of the membership. That is how societies, cultures, *and churches* go, like it or not.

The fact that Holy Scripture and any authentic Christianity absolutely requires a self-named God, the fact that paganism is defined precisely by the man-made conceptions of its gods, the fact that God will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name; none of this matters at all to the PCUSA’s elite culture, just as it didn’t matter in Israel in Amos’ day. Those pushing this agenda in the *PCUSA* are complacent in precisely the same way as Israel was. Confident that God must be in favor of their up-to-date ideas and their so modern way of life, they remain utterly indifferent to the fact that God’s own Word condemns them both for substituting their various sincerities for divine revelation and for substituting their religious rites and ceremonies for faithful living before the Lord.

Again, were Amos present he would condemn the leadership of this church for its apostasy, but he would not, for that reason, excuse the rest of the church. They have long acquiesced in this nonsense and they will again – that is, they will until there are no longer any church members left. And at the last it won’t matter who thought of it first, or who enjoyed the revolution the most, or who got the most earthly benefit from it. *The great and the small will perish together.*

The problem posed for us by Amos’ description of the sins of the wealthy and the powerful – which are the only sins he specifically condemns in his prophecy – is precisely that those without great wealth and power may all too easily think that his condemnations and his warnings do not apply to them. After all, we don’t recline on ivory-inlaid couches, we don’t buy the very finest and most expensive cuts of meat, and we don’t anoint ourselves with perfumes that cost hundreds of dollars. We still have to work for a living. We don’t regard ourselves as belonging to the wealthy and powerful classes of this society, and, in truth, we don’t. Politicians don’t come courting us because of our influence or our great wealth. Opinion shapers are not anxious to discover what we think about this or that. Our names do not appear in the press or on television. *And the result is that we can all too easily think that Amos is talking about other people, not about us when he describes the luxury, the oppressive manipulation, and the sensuality of the life of Israel’s upper classes.* After all, such wealthy and powerful people exist in our land today as they did in Amos’ day, but we are not numbered among them.

But a faithful reading of Amos will disabuse us of this unwillingness to see ourselves addressed in Amos’ preaching. Spiritually speaking, in the way that matters most, to the extent that we acquiesce in the spiritual culture created by our society’s elite *we are one with Amos’ wealthy and powerful subverters of God’s covenant.*

In all that Amos says of them, after all, what honest Christian cannot find himself or herself? How many times have *we* found ceremony replacing godliness in *our own* lives? How many

times have we caught ourselves going through motions in respect to our faith and the things of God? And that is not all. There is plenty of their sensuality in us and the fact that we cannot afford more is hardly to our credit. There is plenty of the oppression of others in us, in our thoughts, words, and deeds, even if more of it takes the form of sins of omission rather than sins of commission. And there is plenty of acquiescence in a way of life that the contemporary elite of our culture have created for our land and our people. We know very well how the love of ease has corrupted our souls and how much we have become – in this society and in this culture – curved in on ourselves, our pleasures, our wants; how much we think of life, and the life of others almost entirely in terms of ourselves. Was that no Amos’ accusation against Israel’s wealthy and powerful: that they were, at bottom, so selfish? How many lives of eternal human beings pass us by day by day with scarcely a thought on our part?

“Each soul we pass must go to heaven or hell...”

Oh, no; Amos is not describing some other heart and some other life. He is describing a heart we find altogether too much of within ourselves. Amos’ description hits the mark all too close to the center. This is preaching meant to humble us, to convict us, to force us to make sure that we have confessed our sins to God and have sought forgiveness through Christ. This is preaching to set us again seeking hard after a different kind of life, a life of faithfulness to God’s covenant and obedience to his law. Remember, those three sermons were first preached to an apostate church, an unbelieving people, they were placed permanently in Holy Scripture for believers to read and hear. Seeing too much of ourselves in the worst of Israel, hearing Amos’ warnings of sin’s subtle power to dull the mind, to blind the spiritual eye to the truth about oneself, should strike conviction deep within us and set us anew working out our salvation in fear and trembling.

There is but one way for us to give answer to Amos’ warning that the small house will be destroyed together with the great house. And that is to prove ourselves, in thought, word, and deed, a rebel against our American 21st century culture, an alien within it, a remnant of another time, another place, another people, finding ourselves *in* this culture but determining not to be a part of it. The poor, by and large, *belonged* to Israel in the 8th century. It is our calling and our challenge to prove that we do not belong to America in the early 21st.