

*Texts: Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24; John 7:37-38*

*Subject: Amos: Justice Rolls Down*

*Theme: One Heart at a Time*

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, November 14, 2021; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There's a scene in the movie Erin Brokovich, where Julia Roberts, portraying the real-life legal assistant who fought for a settlement for residents affected by corporate chemical waste is in the office with her boss Ed Masry, played by Albert Finney. He's bringing her a bonus check for her work and warns her the amount is not what they had agreed upon. I'd show you the clip, but the language is probably not appropriate for the Sunday gathering. She gives a speech about how he doesn't value her work, calls him a few names, and then notices the check is for much more than she had expected. The audience sees justice achieved for the residents of the town, and for Brokovich herself, who fought for the people against all odds. The movie was a success, because it was (mostly) based on a true story, and because it gets to the heart of what we know is fair. We love to see justice played out on the big screen.

In the world, it gets more complicated. We elect and appoint judges to administer justice in courtrooms, elect politicians to enact and amend systems of justice for our society, and advocate for justice on behalf of our neighbors and ourselves in our communities. But we might not always agree on *what is just*, and the extent of *our own responsibility* to bring about justice for others. Should those nations that contribute more to global warming provide help for smaller nations suffering from sea-level rise? Should the wealthiest one-percent of Americans pay a greater share of taxes? Should unemployed citizens be able to receive government help indefinitely? These are some

of the questions we are asking ourselves in the public sphere. How should those who call themselves followers of Jesus respond to issues of inequality and injustice?

Thoughts and prayers?

Amos lived a couple of hundred years after King Solomon, and more than a generation after Elijah. He was from the south, but was a prophet to the north, kind of an outsider. While he was from a small town outside Bethlehem, he was not a poor wanderer, or a child. He was not born into a line of prophets. Most scholars agree he was the owner of herds, and Amos names himself as a *dresser of sycamore trees* - these can be symbols in scripture for eternity and divinity, strength and protection. The dresser would pinch the stalks to help the fruit ripen before the harvest - appropriate for a prophet to want to bring about fruit in the lives of people before God's harvest. He warned of the fall of Judah and Israel's neighbors, many of whom would fall to Assyria in the years to come, prior to the Babylonian exile. But Amos wasn't speaking to Kings or rulers as much as he warned the people and the priests especially of God's desire for justice.

Justice sounds good. We recite the pledge of allegiance and say we are all about liberty and justice for all. But often we struggle with balancing our liberty with justice for others. When we think of justice, we most often are thinking of retributive justice - punishing offenders. We make heroes of Dirty Harry taking out the bad guys, or vigilantes, like Batman and the other member of the *Justice League*, cleaning up the dark streets of Gotham and Metropolis. Retributive justice is about making the punishment fit the crime. *Restorative* justice is about repairing the harm done by those who violate the law, bridging gaps between victims and offenders, and bringing about

healing. Creating a new way, bringing about dialogue, understanding and rehabilitation.

*Distributive* justice is focused on determining who gets what - and finding equitable outcomes; making sure each has what is needed. We also talk about climate justice and economic justice. We claim we want fairness and equality, but we often struggle to define them.

When we read Amos, we hear condemnation of all kinds of injustice. He speaks of crimes against humanity, Gentile nations committing atrocities against one another, selling people into slavery, the killing of pregnant women, and further atrocities. In Israel, the prophet speaks more of systemic oppression of the poor, financial exploitation, sexual immorality, idol worship, and more. He reminds the people of God's promises and their disobedience, holding out a sliver of hope that there may be a chance to avoid destruction, if they could just get their act together.

This week, we remembered those who gave of their time, who made countless sacrifices in the service of their nation, veterans of the armed forces who fought in wars, who served here at home, and many who gave their lives. We are grateful for them, and give thanks, even as we acknowledge the difficulties and horrors of that vocation. From our privileged positions we can judge the actions of those who enlist to fight, to go to war, and engage those who would be enemies at home and abroad. We need them. But we have not always cared for our veterans. And in some cases, those who we have entrusted with the task of defending us have acted unjustly and abused their power. While it can be a struggle, we do honor those who serve, while condemning acts of war and violence.

“The Lord roars from Zion” - where the temple is - the powerful imagery of the Lion of Judah invokes the fierce strength of our God, the one whose voice causes pastures to wither, and the top of Carmel to dry up. We heard of Elijah at the top of Carmel last week - where the prophets of Baal were humiliated, and God’s power was revealed.

Justice and injustice are the results of human actions. God calls us to “do justice.” In our baptismal rite we promise to care for others and the world God made, and *work for justice and peace* in our lives. I don’t think it just happens on its own. *It doesn’t exist without us working for it.* Someone said, “When justice flows like streams, everyone’s field gets watered.” This might be hard for us to accept. Why should everyone get what I’ve worked so hard for? Justice starts with a humble heart. From humility, from turning from ourselves, we might find capacity to live for something other than ourselves.

Amos proclaims the acts of worship by those who do not seek justice as a waste. God will not accept the offerings of the congregation that does not move, work, and live for the sake of the neighbor. God will not condone actions of the faithful that contribute to the suffering of God’s people. The prophet warns of those who seek the day of the Lord, recognizing it as a day of judgement and a day of darkness. Be careful what you ask for.

If we want justice we are called to do it. If we want peace, we have to live it. We know the difference between good and evil. In the film, Erin Brokovich says, “I don’t know [stuff] about [stuff], but I know right and wrong.” (That’s the edited version.) We can come and worship every Sunday, and pray and sing - and we should. This worship

should remind us of God's grace and God's calling in our lives. But it doesn't end at 10am (or 10:15, or 10:30 - depends who's preaching). *We are formed here for life out there.* We are reminded and renewed and reconciled and refreshed though hearing the Word of God, through the sacraments, to be for others. We are called to live out the love we have received from God, following Jesus into a hurting world. Jesus promises to be living water for us, and enacts justice and righteousness through his death and resurrection. We are made for walking with our neighbors, and just like we are gathered to worship, we are sent to serve, to be with those who are suffering, in need, going without, injured, oppressed, incarcerated, and ill, to be the very presence of Christ for them.

We don't have to be perfect, but we are to remember what we're for. Justice might seem like a goal out of reach, but it comes *one heart at a time.* We are already forgiven, already made new - in a process of ongoing transformation. Living out justice looks like following Jesus, living humbly, giving as there is need, trusting in God, and putting Christ at the center of our lives. Call it discipleship.

The prophet speaks: "Seek good and not evil that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts will be with you." God does the work in us and with us in the world. God leads us to the places we are needed, and puts people in our path that we might be of service. God's Holy Spirit gives us eyes to see the needs of our neighbors, and the strength to do what is needed. God is seeking us, calling us, and inspiring us every day.

Amen.