

Amos 2/3 Text: 1:-2:16

Introduction:

Friends!

I'm actually really excited about today's passage, because it is one of the most rhetorically powerful moments in the Old Testament. It's up there with that time Nathan, the prophet, confronted King David for his terrible, sinful failure, and Nathan tricks David into condemning himself. It's just brilliant. But it's a slow burn, you know? It takes awhile to get to the punch in the gut that Amos gives.

What we'll do today is mostly walk through what Amos says. If I were a completely different person, I'd do this as a performance. I'm just me, though, so: whatevs. We'll talk briefly about each of the nations Amos condemns, and the response Israel, the Northern Kingdom, would have to what Amos says.

In the end, we'll talk about the power of this moment, about the point that's so powerfully made to Israel, and I hope we'll leave...with a little bit of fear and trembling, ourselves, a little caution as we interact with those around us.

Let's pray all goes well.

Prayer!

Catch-Up:

So, for those who didn't make it last week: We're talking about Amos, continuing to walk through the Minor Prophets. Amos was from the Southern Kingdom, Judah, home of Jerusalem and God's more-often-than-not (but not always) faithful kings and people. He was an itinerant shepherd and fig-tree arborist, and God sent him to Israel, the Northern Kingdom, to let them know that their persistence in living for false gods and their own lusts and comforts, instead of living for Him, was going to result in their downfall. Amos is the earliest written prophet that we have.

Amos started this way:

***“The Lord roars from Zion
and thunders from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds dry up,
and the top of Carmel withers.”***

After this heading, this introduction, the Book of Amos launches into his message. And it's a message of judgment against all the neighboring countries that border Israel.

The first is against Damascus.

First: Aram-Damascus

***“For three sins of Damascus,
 even for four, I will not relent.
 Because she threshed Gilead
 with sledges having iron teeth,
 4 I will send fire on the house of Hazael
 that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad.
 5 I will break down the gate of Damascus;
 I will destroy the king who is in[b] the Valley of
 Aven[c]
 and the one who holds the scepter in Beth Eden.
 The people of Aram will go into exile to Kir,”
 says the Lord.***

So. I won't go into the great long list of names that Amos drops here; if we did this each time Amos speaks, we'd never move forward in the thing.

Most simply, Amos is saying for all that Damascus has done against God's People, they'll be demolished. The kingdom Hazael built, Aram-Damascus, will collapse; their false-gods will fail, their people will be exiled to Kir, a city in Moabite territory. And, in fact, if we read 2 Kings 16, we can read about this exact thing happening, as the wicked king Ahaz, of Judah, buys the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser's services with Temple cash, and the Assyrian king fulfills the prophecy Amos makes.

Importantly, Damascus' territory shared a huge border with

the Northern Kingdom.

So: Imagine this, with me. A crowd is starting to form around Amos. “Hey! Dude’s condemning Aram-Damascus! It’s entertainment, it’s great, and it’s good news, you know? This is Gospel: God is against our enemies!

But Amos keeps going:

Second: Philistines

6 This is what the Lord says:

***“For three sins of Gaza,
 even for four, I will not relent.
 Because she took captive whole communities
 and sold them to Edom,
 7 I will send fire on the walls of Gaza
 that will consume her fortresses.
 8 I will destroy the king[d] of Ashdod
 and the one who holds the scepter in Ashkelon.
 I will turn my hand against Ekron,
 till the last of the Philistines are dead,”
 says the Sovereign Lord.***

Now, this is getting better. I mean, the Philistines are right nearby, you know?! Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, these were long-standing Philistine city-states, home to enemies

who had been antagonizing Israel since before the Kingdom was split into two. King David had brought them into submission, even made allies of them, but they were antagonists to the Northern Kingdom, having, as Amos puts it, ransacked their cities and sold them into slavery to Edom, a great Kingdom that shared a border with Judah. The Philistine territory also shared a border with the Northern Kingdom.

And the crowd around Amos is getting bigger, right? He's declaring some really great things! God is for Israel! God is against our neighbors! God hasn't forgotten what we haven't forgotten: The Philistines are going to get it! People are starting to get excited. This Southern Kingdom prophet has some good things to say...even though he's an outsider and doesn't realize it's okay to worship baal, like we know.

And people are beginning to feel a little excited about Amos, you know?

Third: Phoenicians

And Amos started Northeast, then turned Southwest, and now he turns Northwest, focusing on Phoenicia, the seafaring, coastal kingdom that had Tyre as its capital. The Phoenicians shared in the crimes of the Philistines, selling people to Edom, rejecting their treaties with Israel, who was just to their south.

Amos says:

9 This is what the Lord says:

***“For three sins of Tyre,
even for four, I will not relent.
Because she sold whole communities of captives to
Edom,
disregarding a treaty of brotherhood,
10 I will send fire on the walls of Tyre
that will consume her fortresses.”***

And we imagine by now that the crowd is just getting larger and larger, and more and more excited. Amos is throwing chum to the sharks, you know? “What about Edom, anyway?” They’re all thinking; I mean, they bought our people. And Amos rips into them, next!

Fourth: Edom

11 This is what the Lord says:

***“For three sins of Edom,
even for four, I will not relent.
Because he pursued his brother with a sword
and slaughtered the women of the land,
because his anger raged continually
and his fury flamed unchecked,***

***12 I will send fire on Teman
that will consume the fortresses of Bozrah.”***

Remember from our conversation about Obadiah, Edom was Israel’s go-to bad guy. A large kingdom, south of Judah, stretching west almost to Egypt.

When Israel was first freed from 400 years of ethnic slavery in Egypt, Edom twice kept the Israelites from going through their territory.

There was, literally, bad blood between Edomites and Israelites. God had chosen to redeem the world through Abraham; Abraham’s son, Isaac, had two grandchildren: Jacob and Esau. Esau, who was born red and hairy, traded away his blessing birthright to Jacob, who was later renamed Israel. Esau went on to be the father of Edom, a word whose name means red, and whose capital city was situated on “hairy mountain.”

Edom became a permanent enemy of Israel for as long as it lasted. Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, all of them prophecy Edom’s destruction. They were hated.

But...you didn’t have a condemnation of Edom without a condemnation of Moab, who was their partner.

And so the crowd would have been ready: Let’s hear it

against Moab! But Amos doesn't give it to them; instead, leap-frogging Moab, he moves North to Ammon.

Fifth: Ammon

13 This is what the Lord says:

***“For three sins of Ammon,
even for four, I will not relent.
Because he ripped open the pregnant women of
Gilead in order to extend his borders,
14 I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah
that will consume her fortresses
amid war cries on the day of battle,
amid violent winds on a stormy day.
15 Her king will go into exile,
he and his officials together,”
says the Lord.***

It makes sense that Amos mentions the Ammonites if he's not going to mention the Moabites. They were sibling clans; Moab and Ammon were, as the Old Testament story goes, descendants of Lot, who drank himself into a blackout and whose daughters then slept with him so that they would have children and a legacy. The Ammonites legacy, as far as Israel was concerned, was an abomination, and they were active enemies of God's People for as long as their kingdoms

existed.

God reminds the crowd around Amos of how bad Ammon has been to them; the exiles of Gad, Rueben, Manasseh, whose territory Ammon had taken, are leaning into what Amos is saying, glad to hear it, remembering their grandparents stories of terror. Everyone's waiting. Moab next?

Yeah! Moab next.

Sixth: Moab

2 This is what the Lord says:

***“For three sins of Moab,
 even for four, I will not relent.
 Because he burned to ashes
 the bones of Edom’s king,
 2 I will send fire on Moab
 that will consume the fortresses of Kerioth.
 Moab will go down in great tumult
 amid war cries and the blast of the trumpet.
 3 I will destroy her ruler
 and kill all her officials with him,”
 says the Lord.***

At this point the crowd is riled up, right? Imagine it! Amos is on fire, here! And even the most angry would have

realized...we're building here; six of our neighbors so far. Who would be seventh? Assyria? Cush? Who would God condemn? Because the seventh, I mean...that's a number of completion. The seventh enemy neighbor condemned, the whole thing's been leading up to that.

And Amos drops it:

Seven:

4 This is what the Lord says:

***“For three sins of Judah,
even for four, I will not relent.
Because they have rejected the law of the Lord
and have not kept his decrees,
because they have been led astray by false gods,
the gods their ancestors followed,
5 I will send fire on Judah
that will consume the fortresses of Jerusalem.”***

Judgment on Israel

Yes! No way! Judah! Judah's condemned! And most of the crowd would have been cheering. I mean, Judah is the alternative to Israel, right? Israel's hatred for Judah is every rivalry and competition you've ever had rolled up into one place. It's been nurtured since before David became King and claimed Jerusalem as the right, best place to worship

God. They claim they've got the "real" Kingdom, that they're "really" God's People, but they're wrong, and everyone around Amos knows it.

This Amos, you know, he's got nothing but good news. I love this guy!

There's cheering, there's happiness...it's been a good day for Israel, man. God has been good to them. People are, like, posting to Facebook and tweeting out how blessed they are, how bright the future is going to be. How God hasn't bailed on them at all. They're rushing to their government-staffed sanctuaries, worship baal a little bit, because, "Hey, God's on our side!"

Imagine: They start to disburse. Go buy some cheap Judean figs before they're hard to get, sell their Phoenician time-share. And Amos clears his throat.

A few people turn back. What's next? I mean. Epilogue, maybe? Some sort of encore. Maybe Amos just wanted tipped.

Amos continues. And everything grows silent as Amos speaks, and Israel realizes that all this time, Amos has been circling them, drawing a noose closer and closer and closer around their necks...and they never saw it coming. They're gobsmacked; God-smacked, really.

God reminds them that as it went with the Canaanites--the Amorites, as Amos puts it--who were mostly wiped out by the Israelites own ancestors, so it will go for them, because...well...let's read:

An Eighth, Worse Word:

6 This is what the Lord says:

***“For three sins of Israel,
even for four, I will not relent.***

***They sell the innocent for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.***

***7 They trample on the heads of the poor
as on the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.***

***Father and son use the same girl
and so profane my holy name.***

***8 They lie down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge.***

***In the house of their god
they drink wine taken as fines.***

***9 “Yet I destroyed the Amorites before them,
though they were tall as the cedars
and strong as the oaks.***

***I destroyed their fruit above
and their roots below.***

**10 I brought you up out of Egypt
and led you forty years in the wilderness
to give you the land of the Amorites.**

**11 “I also raised up prophets from among your
children**

and Nazirites from among your youths.

Is this not true, people of Israel?”

declares the Lord.

**12 “But you made the Nazirites drink wine
and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.**

**13 “Now then, I will crush you
as a cart crushes when loaded with grain.**

**14 The swift will not escape,
the strong will not muster their strength,
and the warrior will not save his life.**

**15 The archer will not stand his ground,
the fleet-footed soldier will not get away,
and the horseman will not save his life.**

**16 Even the bravest warriors
will flee naked on that day,”
declares the Lord.**

A Set-Up:

Ever since Amos opened his mouth, God has been setting Israel up. Every joy they took in his condemnation of a neighbor, all the celebration that Judah, their enemy brother that they hate so much, is at the top of God’s list...it’s all crushed as Amos opens his mouth and they realize Israel is

on the list, too. They are on the list, too. And not just on the list, but the reason for it all along, the people God was building toward.

All the glee they felt at God's judgment against their neighbors was meant to be, simply, a set up for the sense of shame, regret, and fear they ought to feel about their own behavior. Amos has given them emotional whiplash.

Rejection:

We know how things go; they choose to reject Amos' message, and set their hearts against God. The Assyrians come, a neighbor God didn't condemn, and totally destroy Israel, dispersing them. We never hear from the 10 tribes that make up the Northern Kingdom again.

Considering Relevance:

And we could talk about the particular condemnation Israel receives, it's one of social injustice, a disregard and abuse of the poor and powerless, and a disrespect for God shown in a disrespect for those who lived for him, like a Nazarite or a Prophet. But we'll talk more about these things next week, so instead, I want us to consider this:

How can the way Amos makes his point be relevant for us?
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A Blindness:

God could have simply condemned Israel. Bam: Here's what you're doing, and here's what's coming because of it! He doesn't need to communicate to them all the business with their neighbors. It's not relevant, and it's not really something God does much of in the Old Testament.

But what Amos did entranced the Northern Kingdom, got them completely invested in his message, got them completely on his side...until they realized that God wasn't for them, by being against the people they labeled their enemies. God wasn't for them, just because he was against the people they labeled their enemies.

Israel was blind to their own wrongdoing. They were simply blind to it. Maybe they excused it; thought it wasn't as bad as what other countries, kingdoms, ethnicities--all the same thing at once, right? what these groups--did. And somehow, we people will always be ready to condemn others for what they do to our group, even if we're doing the same thing or worse. We'll bully our siblings all day long, but when someone else does it, we're all of a sudden full of righteous indignation. Israel's leaders ate up the poor, and didn't care; but they certainly condemned it when others did it.

Amos' delivery shocked and surprised those who had ears to hear. It was a message that they rejected, one they couldn't believe.

We're in a different place, I hope.

Aware?

We have the Spirit alive in us, pricking our consciences; we engage with Scripture, which reminds us of what lines up with Jesus and what doesn't, we are frank with each other, and "speak the truth in love," about the ways we're living.

So we're probably not surprised by our sinfulness, surprised at the ways we are faithless and less like Jesus than we want to be. We are aware of them.

But, still: What we remember when we gather as a church, and focus on God, isn't always what we remember when we're by ourselves. And part of what this moment on Sunday morning is for is something like that moment when Amos spoke: it's to give us something to keep in mind as we go our various ways.

A Question & A Caution:

So here's a question, one we can remember, and one we have to remember when we're not together:

Whose judgment do we celebrate? Whose condemnation do we celebrate? I want us to notice, this week, every moment we celebrate another person's comeuppance, every time we're glad someone got "taught a lesson," got their "just desserts," was punished for their sins, or simply made an

example of.

Because what Amos reveals is that it is in those moments when we are most caught up in celebrating other people's judgment and condemnation that we are most likely to end up discovering that it's our own faithless behavior that God has condemned.

Israel, again:

All the time Amos was getting ready to condemn Israel for their sins--sins of idolatry, sins of self-indulgence, sins of heartlessness and thoughtlessness--all that time Amos knew where he was going, they didn't. They were busy being distracted by how terrible everyone around them was. The reason Amos' 8th example is such a surprise is because Israel was, in part, so deeply engaged in 1 through 7, in Damascus through Judah.

They were living deep in an "us and them" world, deeply sure that they were exceptional, right with God, and safe.

We are in as deep an "us versus them" time as any other time in the world. Sometimes we're able to insulate ourselves, or we're accidentally born into a time where there are so few of "them," even as there are so many of "us," around that we don't even realize there are other valid, reasonable ways to live a human life.

There is no great sense of unity in the world, and even this morning, as we worship God together, it's likely the case that we deeply disagree about all sorts of things that feel, for most of the week, really, really important, not quite life-and-death important, but so basic to our sense of self that we can't imagine anyone choosing the opposite of what we regularly choose.

We continually find places where we can celebrate "us" and can judge "them" for what they do. When we're at our best, we express confusion--"Why would someone do that? Why would they do that?"--when we're at our worst, we speak as if we're God speaking against one of Israel's neighbors, or simply act out the condemnation we believe others deserve.

The Northern Kingdom was ready and waiting to condemn everyone around them for all that they did wrong, all that they'd done against their people. They were prepared to celebrate Amos' declarations of judgment for everyone but themselves, because Israel was blind to how deeply they'd strayed from the Lord.

Christians:

So what I want to remind us of, and hope that we remember this week, is that we are Christians. We are followers of Jesus. And we have reminders that we cannot forget about what comes to those who rejoice in the condemnation and judgement others receive.

We have Paul, who reminds us, "...at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." We have Jesus himself, who tells us "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Jesus told a crowd, once, who was gathering to stone a woman, "let the person who is sinless throw the first one."

Now, he followed it up, of course, by telling the woman who was to be stoned, as she left unhurt, to stop sinning. I mention this because there are standards of behavior in the Christian life. There are things we reject and resist and behaviors we condemn. We make critical judgments; we must. We don't celebrate every evil act in the world, or pretend there is no "good" or "bad;" to do that creates hell on earth, when we're meant to embody heaven.

But we must be the most aware, of all people, that when we celebrate the condemnation and judgment of others, when we dare mete it out ourselves, it is nearly always the case that we are setting ourselves up for the same thing Amos set Israel up for: rebuke, warning, shame, regret, and, I pray, repentance.

Judgment:

The truth is that we will be judged; everyone will. The Good

News that Paul shared with everyone he met included the promise that God would, at the end of time, “judge people’s secrets through Jesus Christ.” He shares, frankly, how “The sins of some are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them. In the same way, good deeds are obvious, and even those that are not obvious cannot remain hidden forever.” Everything will be exposed when the sun finally sets on the Day of the Lord, and all evil will be condemned.

We have nothing to fear in that: The great Christian hope is that because we’ve trusted in Jesus, even though, as Paul puts, “all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body,” we have nothing to fear in judgment, except that our sense of gratitude will be more than we can handle when we realize what it means to be a part of God’s forgiven people.

Conclusion:

Look: Most of us have learned more about the Lord than we can remember. We’ve had a thousand moments of insight, of wonder, of really thinking something’s interesting. We’ve forgotten more amazing moments of clarity and hope than we’ve remembered. Today is just one more message, one more thing about God that’s easy to forget in the middle of all the other things.

But I know as we watch or read the news, as we talk with friends or strangers, as we drive by here and there, that we'll be constantly tempted. Tempted to, rather than make the good critical judgments about right and wrong that we must make, instead we'll be tempted to hope for the worst for people who we don't understand, we'll be tempted to celebrate whenever someone obnoxious or who disagrees with us gets knocked down, we'll be drawn into whatever confirms for us how wrong, and foolish, and faithless those other people are. We'll embrace the divisive pull of the world, which makes "us-es" and "thems" and teaches us to condemn and judge and dismiss. It's just going to happen; it's part of our world, a tug on us.

But I don't want us to forget what Amos does today. It is in those moments when we are most caught up in celebrating other people's judgment and condemnation that we are most likely to end up discovering that it's our own faithless behavior that God has condemned.

If that happens this week, if we wake up to our own faithlessness, in anyway, I hope we can do what we always do, which is turn in repentance to our Father God who lets us take His mercy for granted and welcome the haunting presence of the Holy Spirit who helps us live our brother Jesus' better way. I hope more than this, that we recognize that we have nothing to celebrate in the shame, condemnation, or judgment another person experiences in

this world, because it's just one more triumph of sin anytime we do. And we turn from that habit, reject it, even as we turn to the Lord who'll save us in spite of how much we rejoice at those who mourn.