

Rite Worship and Correct Worship
Amos 5:18-27

October 11, 2020

By Ms. Madison Harner

Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

For as long as I can remember I have heard a certain phrase when someone is frustrated with something and hope seems lost. This phrase tends to come out when there is turmoil in the world, in our nation, or in our personal lives. News channels can provoke this phrase. My grandmother, who has Alzheimer's, very understandably used this phrase last week. I wonder how many of you will nod as I say this phrase: "Oh how I just long for Jesus to come back." When I was little my initial reaction was always "NO! He has to wait until I can get married and have babies and then he can come back" and make all things new, make all things right, dry all the tears where there will be no more... because for the longest time my only desire was to grow up and become a stay at home mom. Jesus surely could not come back until that was accomplished! It's precious to sit in the naivety of that simple desire. One that many have, and I honor!

But that's not my story, and it's not my only desire anymore. But I have a feeling the Israelites knew something similar to this phrase in their own time. Only Amos did not seem to agree with them.

Over the years, and particularly now as I come to our text, the words of darkness are stark. Is not the Day of Yahweh, the Day of the Lord, darkness and not light? You see, the Israelites were happy doing what they were doing, their rites of worship, their rituals of feast, fast, tithe, offerings, their way of worshiping... and longing for the Day of Yahweh when their enemies will be crushed and they received their jeweled crowns of glory.

But is their rite worship R I T E worship, correct worship?

Before God makes all things new, there will be darkness. We're experiencing bits of darkness these days. Some of us more than others. Darkness comes in all forms. Sometimes it's slow and sneaks up on us, and sometimes it's as loud and as forceful as a clap of thunder. Darkness can look like depression and isolation as many have faced over the last few months. Darkness can look like the racism that is still prevalent in our country. Darkness can look like a glass ceiling that never seems to crack open in the workforce for many women and Black Indigenous People of Color. Darkness can look like being ostracized for being part of the LGBTQ community. We know that one thing is true. The darkness in some form or fashion does not escape any of us, and neither will the darkness of judgement.

Amos is telling the Israelites in verse 19 that when the Day of Yahweh comes it will be a day of no escape. In Amos' day, lion attacks and bear attacks were often fatal, and the bite of a snake was almost always deadly. I don't know about you, but I think I would agree that if I met any of those three, I would presume that they would be deadly for me as well! At every turn darkness will come no matter what. Whether you are running from a bear or a lion, you're going to eventually make it home only to face the snake.

What Israel doesn't realize is that they too, along with their enemy nations, will be judged for their sinful actions. Just because they think they are upright and just, might not mean their actions are telling the same story.

Fleming Rutledge is a phenomenal preacher. I was reading one of her sermons and her words spoke powerful truth that I think we sometimes ignore. She says she was driving one day and after a series of events ended up taking a few wrong turns. After half an hour she made it back to town and noticed that the turn she wanted to make, the turn that would get her to where she needed to be, had a left turn arrow with a line drawn through it. We all know what that means. She can't make this turn. She looked around, didn't see any police, and decided to ignore the sign. She says she sped up, pulled into the left lane to make the illegal left turn, and there in that moment with a car that she had not seen misses a collision within an inch of her life. She states that by a miracle of God's grace she swerved at the last second. In telling this story, she said people declared it not a sin, but a mistake, or she was tired and frustrated, a million excuses, but Fleming states "I put other lives in danger, I did not take proper precautions, I did not think of what it might mean to my family if I were killed. Perhaps worst of all, I presumed upon God's mercy. These traits are so tenaciously imbedded in human personality that we scarcely think about them. Christian tradition has us taught us to think of them as sin, but they have been so diluted that we don't think we are sinning going even 8 miles an hour over the speed limit. We are breaking the law are we not?"

Amos appeals to the people in verses 21 and 22, I hate, I despise your religious festival; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. God no doubt in the Levitical code and Deuteronomy laid out correct worship for the Israelites. They were given instruction on how to submit to God through ritual sacrifices and burnt offerings, but we see time and time again where this act was defiled. Let us not quickly forget Aaron and the golden calf. Amos uses the Hebrew word "lo" meaning a negation, usually no or not, 5x in 20-22. This can be seen as God's "NO" to Israel. The Israelites had ceased worshiping at the temple in Jerusalem and were using sites at Dan and Bethel which Amos references in early chapters. The problem with ceasing temple worship was that they were coming to the alter where pagan worship was being intertwined with worship of Yahweh.

God detested this. God could not receive the sweet smell of their offerings or hear the glorious sound of their harps because their worship had been defiled.

The Israelites did not see a problem with this. God had instructed them to worship... and they were worshiping. How could the Day of Yahweh not bring destruction upon their enemies? Why was there darkness for the Israelites, too?

Is their rite worship correct worship?

Is OUR rite worship correct worship in the way we live our lives?

I am convinced God cares less about the act of worship, and more about the heart and posture in which we come to worship.

Do you remember Ananias and Sapphira? They certainly thought their actions constituted correct worship by tithing, but since they kept some money for themselves and lied about it, they died right there, right on the spot.

Our worship is a reflection on our relationship with God and when we are living in unjust worship, we present ourselves living unjust lives and in wrong relationship with God. This brings me back to Fleming Rutledge's sermon. She mentions that we think of sin as a series of misdeeds but in Biblical theology, it is a condition. It isn't only something we "commit," it's something that we "are in." We see it right here with the Israelites. They are living in blindness to their sin because they are in it. They cannot even see how they are breaking the first commandment which is "you shall have no other gods before me."

It's long past time we take a good hard look at how we come to worship. It might even be easier to see in these days because we haven't been able to "physically" come to worship. When we pray and bring our requests before God, are they mindful of the state of our Country? Are they mindful of the many people who are risking their lives in so many ways for our health, for our freedom, and for our right to have opinions? When we're not in a Sunday service, how are we spending our time and our energy? Is it pleasing to God?

What in your life does rite worship and correct worship look like?

Amos doesn't stop here. What has to be one of the most influential verses from the prophets comes next. He says in verse 24 But let justice roll down like a river, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. We often want justice to roll on like a raging river, don't we? In times of heated political campaigns, it seems like candidates from either side are calling for justice for one group or another with a megaphone and an in your face agenda, but from Amos' point of view... the waters can't roll because the wadi is all dried up. This body of water that's supposed to last all year long. This body of water that's supposed to be connected to the source of life is all dried up because it isn't connected to the source of life because the worship is happening at Dan, or Bethel, or on the couch from a screen, or Washington DC, or anywhere else but the temple in Jerusalem. We want the raging river of justice to roll, but what if instead it needs start again with a trickle. What if we are that trickle?

We want the waters to roll, for someone else to start it, but what if it starts with us? Amos' words at the end of this chapter happen to be some of the most problematic in all of Amos, and even in the prophets for that matter. The reference to the wilderness and the kings, the verb tenses are crazy, but what we do know is that Amos is calling for judgement on the people of Israel because the RITE, Ritual worship is not correct worship. Their sinful lives are not leading their neighbors to justice. We know that about 40 years after Amos' prophecy exile comes to the Israelites. The gods they made for themselves, the idols that we've propped up in Red or Blue or Purple, on the hills of Bethel have consequences and there is no escape for those who don't live in accordance with the correct worship. The kind of worship that our righteous God desires from us.

All of God's no's for Israel end with the gracious Yes found in Jesus. In whom he justifies all believers and removes us from the no of the law's condemnation that the Israelites received in exile. The heaviness of the burdens of the Israelites were carried to the Cross by the suffering

servant. The Israelites fell into the trap of God offering forgiveness so they lived how they thought they could by just getting by. Let us not follow in their footsteps of watching Jesus bear our sin only to live unjustly in our rite worship. The river that flows from Jesus' side is an ever-lasting stream that cleanses us. It then calls forth from us correct worship to a life of justice and righteousness. A life tending to the poor, oppressed, those living on the margins, those living at the border, those living in the well of racism because of the color of their skin, the widow, the hungry, the thirsty. In the words of Rutledge, she says "Yes. All are God-damned Christians-literally. As Paul wrote in Galatians we are under God's curse on account of sin. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us. God made him to be sin who knew no sin. It's no wonder he said "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? We see the God-forsakenness of sin in Christ. And in the same moment we see the victory of God over sin." Peter reminds us that He himself bore our sins and in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. May we use our words to bring glory to God. May we use our actions, our time and resources so they are pleasing to God's sight. May our feasts smell glorious because of who we invite to the table. My friends, may we live in righteousness so that from us a trickle of justice may flow and our outwardly, correct worship bring light to the darkness of our sin-filled world. Amen.