HOPE IN A TIME OF ANXIETY, Part 2

Colossians 1:24-29; Amos 5:14-24
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Israel, that is the northern kingdom, was doing well under Jereboam II. The borders were secure. The territory, its most expansive in its history. No military threats, a lengthy time of peace, and a booming economy. A farmer from Tekoa in Judah shows up one day forecasting doom. His complaint: a failure to enact justice and embody righteousness.

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Religious life is flourishing. The festival days are well attended. The assemblies are crowded. The offerings are overflowing. Everyone loves the music. Religious life must be going very well if everyone agrees about the music! And yet Amos describes the day of the Lord's coming as "darkness, not light," as though one escaped the jaws of a lion only to be mauled by a bear. Why? Despite the flourishing of the faith, there is no justice.

The substance of the injustice is that the rich are stealing from the poor. They are manipulating the laws of indebtedness such that a small debt from a farmer, say, snowballs into a larger debt that allows the already wealthy owner of the debt to claim large tracts of land. The political system in place is making the rich, richer, and the poor, poorer. The religious system is at best turning a blind eye to this, insisting that it keep its nose out of politics, but more likely complicit in it by providing a theological rationale. Read what proverbs says about the poor, if you doubt the latter.

Amos is reminding the people what faith is for. It's not about achieving a certain correct form of ritual. It's about a certain kind of living, a kind of living that attends to justice and love in the midst of life without regard to the artificial categories of religion and politics.

It is not a particularly anxious time in the life of Israel, but I think it does speak to the anxious times in which we live. As Janet mentioned last week, we are anxious about many things, but particularly about concerns stemming from the election. This anxiety poses certain challenges to our faith and hope.
James Smith, in the most recent Christian Century, tells the story of a Roman general writing Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, for advice about anti-Christian sentiment in the province. With Constantine, Christianity became the only "legal" religion in the Roman Empire. Boniface wants to impose this order, but Augustine urges patience, reminding him that we are not yet in the time of the kingdom of God. Augustine's "two kingdom theory" which he outlines in *City of God* supposes that there is an earthly kingdom and a heavenly kingdom and that we live in the time between. We cannot force God's hand. Some have concluded from his theory that Christians should withdraw from the world as in the monastic movement, but this was clearly not his intent. He encouraged active participation in the earthly kingdom, if for no other reason than Christians could ameliorate the harm done by a politics of "self-love" and lust for power.

Smith writes of Augustine's theory that "politics is not indifferent to the good but neither is it the means by which the kingdom arrives…. Politics is a mode of bearing witness to the good and enacting love of neighbor in the meantime" (p.44-45). He goes on to say that "ours is the time of wheat and tares, sheep and goats, deep differences lived out in close proximity." Politics is not optional for Augustine, but "citizens of the city of God are called, as an expression of loving their neighbors, to contribute to the common good by collaborating in the messiness" of this life.

Many of us are disturbed by the current political rhetoric, the distortion of facts, and the demonization of certain groups of people in our society. We are anxious because some communities have come to harm already through falsehoods and more may suffer after the election. Some have lost hope, but Augustine would urge us to become more engaged, not less. Smith writes, "Our political institutions are not immune to incursions of grace and have not been left untouched by the influence of Christianity" (p. 46).

Our hope does not hinge on the outcome of these elections. There have always been people forgotten by our government. I heard the other day that in the first presidential election, only 6% of the population were eligible to vote. That electorate has expanded over the years largely from the involvement of Christians engaging their government on behalf of the excluded.
I don't want to overlook the fact that some who call themselves Christian have engaged the government with a view toward imposing their beliefs on the public. The overturning of Roe v. Wade was celebrated by Christians who had for decades advocated for strict restrictions on abortions. Many of these same Christians have been active politically pushing for a strong military, elimination of marriage rights for same gender couples, censorship of libraries around literature referencing exploration of gender identity.

Lest we drift into self-righteousness, let me remind us that Presbyterians spent the better part of a century defending slavery, and a half-century convinced that homosexuality was a sin. A few of us recognized the slave and gay man as among the least of these that Jesus identified with. Political engagement, for the follower of Christ, begins in humility and flows from faith. It serves the neighbor and not just the self.

But it's not optional. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos delivers these words not to the political establishment, but to the religious community. When God comes, they will not be looking at the quality of their worship, but at their contribution to fairness in the community. God will be asking what we did for the least of these.

Justice is about fairness and righteousness about relationship. The faith community of Amos' day failed to build a bridge between the rich and the poor; failed to recognize any obligation to those in need. Instead they built walls that served their own interest, that protected their position, that excluded the unworthy.

Jesus, on the other hand, healed the sick, associated with sinners, brought the excluded into community, fed the hungry, spoke good news to the poor. He instructed his disciples

to do the same. And for this he was crucified by the secular and religious establishment. His death was the one distinctly political act of his life. It was a declaration of his solidarity with those who suffered injustices, an embodiment of a faith devoted to the hungry, the oppressed, the despised.

What's this all got to do with November 5th and our anxiety around that? Part of that anxiety arises out of the recognition that politics shapes our world. It can define winners and losers, rewarding some while punishing others. It has the power to make our world safer or more dangerous. It can create a huge safety net for many people or restrict its benefits to a few whom it deems worthy.

Some are worried that it has become unmoored. Jurgen Moltmann considers this the result of "political idolatry." It occurs, he says, when "representatives rise above their constituents and when their constituents bend the knee before them." In these conditions, he writes, "delegation leads to domination, representation to alienation, functional rule to absolute authority" (p. 39). We may be worried that we're heading in that direction.

But we are not occupied by Rome. We aren't ruled by a dictator. We live in a democracy which claims to be of the people, by the people and for the people. As James Smith says, "it is not immune to faith." We are not a people without vision. We try to live "whole lives" that engage the world. We are interested in justice for those who have been forgotten whether their suffering is the result of poverty, a lack of opportunity, or rejection based on prejudice.

We take this vision for a better world to the polls. As we focus on faith, the faith of Jesus Christ, we ask different questions. We ask how the hungry will fare under the candidate's proposals. We ask about the impact on the prison system, on children in poverty. Who's included in their health care agenda? Not everybody asks these things, but we do. This faith community is working for justice, is building relationships with the least of Jesus' kin. And because politics shapes the world in which people suffer and the world in which they find healing, we vote.

Marianne Williamson said "Hope is born of participation in hopeful solutions." There are candidates up and down the ballot who embrace at least some of our vision. The first thing we can do to address our anxiety is to focus on faith, to do something, to vote. "It may be" says Amos, "that God will be gracious." It's God's world and God is paying attention. There's hope in that.

Look! God loves the world enough to hold it accountable on the one hand and to invite our participation in blessing it on the other. The key to being on the right side of that equation is to hold on to the vision, to belong to the sort of faith community that is about letting justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; to do right by people and to welcome them. Take this vision to the polls, but the work doesn't end there. We hope that our representatives will be helpful in the work for justice. Truthfully, they have a very mixed record on that. Once the votes are counted, we will still be about feeding the hungry, doing the work of justice, welcoming the stranger, preaching good news to the poor.

Paul never held political office, but he gave himself to the work of expanding the faith community, of welcoming strangers, of blessing those who previously had no share with the God that Paul worshipped. He suffered imprisonment, beatings, slander, and as legend has it, even death to preach good news to a people who were not God's people. You and I are here because Paul was willing to break down the walls that separated us. It was for this that Christ suffered: that all might know God's love and experience the truth that each of us is important to God. It was for this that Paul chose to share in the sufferings of Christ and invites us also to make those sacrifices that open the floodgates of justice and the streams of right relationship.

These are anxious times. We are worried for our country's future. But we get to vote our vision. There's hope in that. We are and will continue to be loved by God. There's hope in that. The earth is still the Lord's. There's hope in that. And once all those elected officials take office, the hungry, the homeless, the marginalized will still have us seeking to live out the vision of justice, the hospitality of welcome. It would be nice if our representatives would facilitate that work and it would please God if they did so; but it won't change the work that God has given us to do in the words of Micah, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. There's hope in that. Amen.

Resources:

Moltmann, Jurgen. "The Cross and Civil Religion" in *Religion and Civil Society.* Harper and Rowe Publishers: New York NY, 1970.

Smith, James K. A. "Wisdom from Augustine in an Election Year" in *Christian Century* November 2024, pp. 42-46.