24th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.8.26

Amos 5:18-24

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
Why do you want the day of the LORD?
It is darkness, not light,
as if someone fled from a lion
and was met by a bear
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall
and was bitten by a snake.
Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light,
and gloom with no brightness in it?
I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Matthew 25:1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten young women took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those young women got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet, and the door was shut. Later the other young women came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (364)

Amos was a shepherd. He was, moreover, the son of a shepherd. Though he finds his place in the Bible among the prophets, he wasn't a prophet, which was a formal role in society, a political role of some privilege. It was one for which you'd even study and train, one that put you in proximity to power. A prophet operated in service to the king, if though speaking hard words of truth to the king. But Amos wasn't that, which he himself admits, perhaps even insists: "I am no prophet, nor even the son of prophet. I am a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees."

But I just can't today. Right? I mean, have you listened to some of the victory speeches this week? Iowa, Texas, Georgia, Ohio. The Carolinas. Kansas! These feature people whom one analyst I listen to, and a particularly pessimistic one at that, summed up thus: "...nice people...," "...great, nice, normal people..." "...good public servants who we can be proud of..."

And many of them, most of them it seems, have come into politics through the side door. Their stories: they strike me as very American stories, come to make up a government that is of the people by the people for the people. Surveying the whole country, we've got incoming several physicians, a couple of pastors and a seminarian, a nurse for the VA, an environmental engineer, a firefighter, a professor of city and municipal planning, a musician, a union leader. It's common that politicians play up their humble roots, but this seems more an emergence from the middle, making it both surprising and structurally sound.

But what about Amos, you ask. Okay, right. He was a shepherd, and not a shepherd the way, say, King David had been. David, who two or three centuries earlier had been found among the flocks, would go on to become the great king of Israel and Judah. He was so powerful a leader that he united these two kingdoms into one. And by him, the notion of a shepherd-king was given legs. By him, being a shepherd would go on to suggest hidden power, something that operated more poetically than actually. It's not for nothing that Jesus would be cast as a shepherd, though he never was an actual shepherd.

Amos, though: he was an actual shepherd. He wasn't found among his flocks to be anointed by God for some special task at some special moment. He didn't even live in a time that had a specific task necessary to be done. Unlike his neighbors in the Bible–the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the minor prophets like Obadiah and Nahum–Amos

doesn't speak to us from a time of crisis for the people. He rather speaks from a time of relative calm: peace, prosperity. Old threats were in retreat as regards Israel and Judah. Trade was on the rise and trade routes came through their territory. By these, Israel and Judah enjoyed new wealth when Amos lived. Why, there was talk even of winter palaces and summer palaces for those in power, second-home-owning becoming a thing. All of which made for social conditions that required little of the people, simply that they toe the line, simply that they follow the law and go about their lives. And none of which made a prophet a needful thing, nothing urgent to be said, nothing of crisis to be addressed.

Which can itself make a prophet a needful thing.

Nothing like social calm to make everyone fall asleep, especially those with comfortable beds, and with several bedrooms to choose from, with several houses even to select from as to where to end the day.

Apparently, some people are thinking following the election this week that we can go back to normal. Apparently, other people are worried that those people who imagine going back to normal will be disappointed, and will become embittered, when things don't go back to normal. As for me, neither a political strategist nor a prophet nor even a shepherd, I don't think "back to normal" is an option, an aim, or even much of the conversation anymore. Joe Biden's presidency might have been an expression of that urge. But we're in a different moment now, and this was a very different election. It cut deep. This one wasn't about changing the head but about changing the whole body. And it wasn't about switching who among the regular cast has power, but about changing who is even included in the cast. "...nice people..." "...great, nice, normal people..." "...good public servants who we can be proud of..."

And young. A lot of them are young, people plugged into what it feels like to live now, how things are hard in a new way. Those incoming are 15 years younger on average than those outgoing.

You know, it might be good.

Dare we hope that it will be good?

And was the pre-Trump normal so very good that we want to go back to it? The war on terror? The financial crisis, which no one went to jail for? Can we not do better than *this*?

As we near the end of the church year, so we near the end of whatever gospel narrative we've been following for the year. And as we near the end of the gospel narrative, whichever one, things become more intense, more overwhelming and intimidating and even distressing. This, of course, because we close in on the crucifixion, Jesus' painful and humiliating death. This, because we also open up to what new way the crucifixion opens up: resurrection!

We've got two weeks left after this one in th church year–and the readings are not going to go easy on us. We've got two weeks left with the Gospel of Matthew, with his mounting anger at the religious authorities. As a pious Jew, which we think this gospel writer was, he was especially dismayed at the way the religious leaders–Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes–were misguided and misguiding, especially enraged by their corruption and lack of care. Just so, as we near the hinge point of ending and beginning, this gospel becomes increasingly angry, Jesus becomes increasingly confrontational, and the promised day of God becomes something to fear as much as to hope for.

Which might surprise you as someone who likely so hopes, which always dismays me as someone who's got to preach on it. You'd think the Day of the Lord would be light and joy. You'd think the advent of God closing in on us would bring peace and abiding love. You'd think this would be something our scripture writers would tell of in angelic terms: "Heavenly host sing, 'Alleluia!'"

And there is that. There is, indeed, Christmas. The birth of God in a baby in a stable with angels and shepherds and humble glory all around offers a nuance, a corrective to the fury of the Ancient of Days coming with a ferocious thirst for justice in the land. The ways in which the world will change once God is come as we remember and hope for at Christmas will be as a household changes when a baby is born or adopted into its midst, a most lovely disruption, but thoroughgoing one.

But there's a problem as well, a potential one. It dwells in the distance between what's coming and where it shall arrive. It dwells in the likely chasm between the character of what is coming and the character of that amidst which it shall arrive. When you wait for the Lord and you also believe the way you're living is close to what God intends, you'd better make sure the way you're living is in fact close to God's way. When you sound the

gong and sing in the Temple that God is about to arrive in your midst and you live though in ways that will be alien to God's grace, you are in for a rude arrival.

See, the problem is when you assume that God's advent will make for a comfortable appearance in your household, in your heart. The problem comes when you think your way of life is one God will bless rather than one God would dismantle, God would perhaps even gladly see destroyed. The arrogance it takes to firmly believe that the God of all time and all creation might arrive in your town square and say, "Yup, it's all good," is quite a feat. The conceit of being so very uncritical and ahistoric, the conceit of believing that, say, for example consumer capitalism backed by military might is anything God would arrive amidst and endorse: that's quite a feat.

And there are those who seem to believe it, very loudly and proudly to believe it. And they've held high public office for a while now, peacockingly so for the last couple of years (a very distressing, very violent, very retributive, indeed nihilistic couple of years.) I think of Pete Hegseth, the clown with the flamethrower, and look forward to the week ahead he might be facing.

Or maybe not. Trump appointing Stephen Miller might be portent of even worse to come.

For now.

("...nice people...," "...great, nice, normal people..." "...good public servants who we can be proud of...")

The readiness of the bridesmaids, the readiness to meet the arrival fully prepared for its coming and what its coming would amount to: if parables can be boiled to having a meaning (which they can't be, for the most part), then this is the meaning of this parable, that the coming of the Lord requires some readiness, it requires some correct anticipation of what closeness to God feels like and some correct appraisal for whether that closeness will come as familiar or come as a shock. Because God is love, but God is also holy, hotly holy; God is faithful, but God is also righteous, burning righteousness.

Which the people didn't seem to get.

Which enraged Amos all the more.

A holy nation, they took themselves to be. One called by God and favored by God, they knew themselves to be, so sure, so sure! And therefore beyond reproach. Assuming

that God's blessing meant God would ever join them on their way, the people had it backwards, that it was rather to be that they were to join in God's way.

Which they could do with God at some distance, a course correction done by choice in choosing grace, a governance of magnanimity, an allocation of resources from a faith in abundance.

Or which they could do once God has arrived and all is out of their hands, beyond their choosing, now fully overwhelmed by God.

For all this, Amos was confounded that the people would proclaim an eagerness for God's coming, offended that they assumed it would be anything but calamity. When you live as if in a skyscraper's penthouse but one whose foundation is built on the backs of the poor, you shouldn't get too excited by someone whose coming will be liberation for those whose backs are bent–becasue you're in for quite the calamitous fall. When you feast on food you don't raise, grow, harvest, or prepare, you shouldn't get too excited by one whose coming will be freedom for those now set to slaving away. The day of the Lord will bring such holiness, such righteousness, that it is unalloyed good news only for those whose lives have been most marred by desecration, most scarred by injustice. For everyone else, it will come also as loss.

Ron Sider, a Christian theologian and social activist, claimed in his classic text *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* that God wants liberation for the rich as well as for the poor.

I'd add that such liberation is a far more ambivalent thing for those who have much in this life, and have much to lose, even if such loss brings greater still blessing.

I want equity, food enough for all, healthcare enough for all, housing for all, dignity for all. I also really like my quiet home on my three acres of land. And I recognize how at odds with myself that makes me, how at odds with God that makes me, hoping for God's arrival but hoping also that God will be a gracious guest, not a force that would blow the roof off and grab me by the heart.

Amos, for his part, would mince no words. As if speaking for God: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

See, as a shepherd, he had an earthier perspective. As not-a-prophet, he had fewer powerful friends to worry about offending, less access to the halls of power than someone who might want to keep those channels open. Less blessed by this corrosive, corrupting world, he had all the more reason to throw his lot in with the Lord.

As for our incoming shepherds, not one of them is an actual shepherd as far as I can tell, but they're closer to being so than the billionaires in the cabinet are, for example–though Scott Bessent does insist that he's a soybean farmer and not merely a global hedge-fund manager. Also, none of them seem quite as lit up by anger as Amos was. These are happier not-prophets as far as I can tell. Nonetheless, they give us a chance of arranging our society so to be slightly more inline with what God intends. No, in fact I'd say all the more they give us such a chance.

We've had so much anger lately, so much rage. So much bitterness and vengeance and "stick it to you" politics, which is perhaps one of the things the wide electorate rejected this week. The corruption of Ken Paxton, the cruelty of Vivek Ramaswaney, the racism of Mike Collins, the unreadiness of Darlene Graham, and the disdain for the voters that endorsing such candidates reveals: enough. We can do better.

The prophets warn that we can't be perfect. In fact, all the readings this week–the two I chose and more so the several I left unheard–all suggest, if not insist, that there's simply no way we can do this, not absolutely, and certainly not without God's intervening help. We are simply too sinful, simply too convinced that it's dog-eat-dog out here, eat or be eaten. We're simply too convinced that creation itself is a zero-sum realm, where to have is to make others have not.

And the thing is, we're not wrong in this assessment. There is real truth in this assessment. Ron Sider took it from all sides following the publication of his classic *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Economists came after him, as did his own people, the evangelical wing of the North American church, which itself has become evermore comfortable with capitalism. He wrote a revised version to calm everyone down, to show that he'd learned a few things from when he was a young man to when he was forty years older. So we're not wrong to understand this created order is one ever on the edge of disorder–greed-induced, fear-induced disorder.

Which is why God's coming to it is a most astonishing thing–and God arriving not only as God's alien, forceful self, but moreover God arriving as a baby, as one of us and at our most vulnerable, needful, dependant, and insistent time of life. That God would choose to join us in the scrum; that God would choose to subject Godself to its slings and arrows; that God would press into soft flesh God's abounding, eternal grandeur; that God would press Godself into the soft flesh of one of us: astonishing.

We have to get ready.

Oh, we have to get ready!

Thanks be to God.