

Until Justice Flows Like Water
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24

Let justice roll. We hear it in this sacred text from Amos, another Old Testament prophet who seems to pop out of nowhere. He hasn't spent any energy building a movement. He doesn't host a talk show. He doesn't want to be in the spotlight. Amos doesn't want this message to be focused upon him. He doesn't want the prestige or the honor. It's not about him.

But then – there's ample evidence that Amos isn't poor. He's a herdsman. A herdsman is more powerful than a shepherd but that doesn't exactly explain how or why it gives him the right to loudly articulate his woes about the Day of Yahweh.

The idea of the Day of Yahweh existed long before Amos, but he just twisted it around. He warned them that this day of battle had an outcome that wouldn't be what the people of Israel had always assumed it would be. Yes, God would indeed *"vanquish those who oppose the divine will in the world"* – but the vanquished wouldn't be their enemies.

Instead, Amos insisted those would be decimated would be Israel itself.

And it's with that faith and crusty conviction that Amos gets on his soapbox. He interrogates. He exposes. *"Why do you want these festivals, these parties that you think show that you love God?"* He asks. *"Why does this seem like such a bright shiny option for you? Because it won't work out."*

This is what he wants them to understand. It won't be what they expect. Why? What went wrong? Where have these people failed? What could be so horrible that the chosen people of Israel would be cast into darkness? Why are Amos' words so dang harsh?

When ritual actions and solemn assemblies are completely disconnected from the ways the people are actually living out their faith, Amos has a problem. That's what he is seeing around him, a people who have not looked within themselves before they lit their candles and sung their hymns.

It's not what we do – the lighting the candles, the singing of hymns or the baptizing of the babies or giving the offering. It's how we live when we are not in worship, praising God. That's what upsets Amos. That's what has him on his soapbox.

Preachers of all kinds have claimed his words in moments when they've needed to be more prophetic than pastoral... *"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* Noted among them, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who told a crowd gathered in support of striking Memphis sanitation workers

"Somehow ...(we) must be an Amos. Somehow we must use these words. But, we must do more than speak them. We must do even more than believe them. They must be so true that justice rolls out of us and flows like a stream in all that we do."

Amos pushes right where it hurts. *"People of Israel, if you refuse to let justice roll from you, then fine. God will check out, too! God is not listening to the noise of your songs. God doesn't like your melodies. God wants something more. You are stuck, but God wants justice to roll."*

The kind of justice that Amos imagines is ever-flowing. It's constant. It gushes forth, bubbles up, keeps on giving. It does not stop simply because those people aren't members of our congregation or live in our neighborhood. The justice that Amos calls us toward looks outward to see those things that we'd really rather not see.

Jesus had a bit of Amos in him. He knew that his work was all about loving people, not fairness or even doing the right thing at the right time. Amos and Jesus both knew that righteousness was simply about loving people. Now, I know. That's not easy. Sometimes, it feels next to impossible.

Last Sunday, all I wanted to do when I got home from church was take a nap. Getting ready that morning for worship had been a comedy of errors, maybe we were too close to the full moon?

On the first chilly morning of the season, our Meetinghouse furnace wouldn't turn on (thankfully, Myron knew where the reset switch is in the basement).

Folks we expected to get here didn't get here on time, even though they got an extra hour of sleep.

The deacon's cabinet, where we store the communion supplies, was sticking.

A stranger (to our community, anyway), was found wandering in my office. Later, I found that some cash I had left on my desk for the Sunday school kids bake sale was missing. And I've said things like *"Bummer"* and *"someone needed it more than you"* and *"I'm a dummy for leaving my door open anyway"* but in my heart it's a quick leap to *"what a jerk! To steal from me? I'm a good person for crying out loud!"*

And then, I felt guilty and grumpy because I just spent an hour and ten minutes leading a church service telling people to love each other, and I can't seem to go more than ten minutes myself without being their number one hypocrite... some preacher!

So I walked around coffee hour catching up and chatting with people. I talked to some youth about their Halloween costumes, thanked a saint of the church for lending a hand on work day, tested the math skills of our Sunday school students at the bake sale.

Then I went home, sat in my recliner, and checked my phone to see if there was any news about Julie, Sue and Vinay running the NY city marathon.

Nothing on that yet. But wait... there's been another shooting in Texas. In a church, during Sunday service. Pregnant women, children, the pastor's daughter - gone. Somehow, it's never the time to talk about common sense changes to make our citizens safer because we can't even catch our breath between the tragedies. We've politicized and polarized this issue, and we are stuck. We've been down this predictable road so many times before.

Somehow, we've got to get unstuck. And I like to think we can do that if just stick to the gospel... love God, love our neighbor, love ourselves.

But we live in a world where people are shot in a plaza in Las Vegas while attending a concert, where a vehicle mows down people on a walking path in New York, where others are shot while attending worship in Texas.

We live in a world where some live high on the hog while others are barely paid a living wage and others sleep in shelters or in doorways. Are thoughts and prayers the only things we can offer?

You don't have to love any one person's political agenda, but you do have to love them, if you want to follow Jesus. And if we can't bring ourselves to love each other and see the humanity in each other, we might as well close and lock that meetinghouse door. Because all else rings pretty hollow.

Somehow, justice must roll through each of us. It must be in our hands and in our hearts. It must be in the ways that we reveal our faith every day. It must be in the way we address our society's issues like poverty, domestic violence, economic security, gun violence. We must look at our neighbor - the worker, the immigrant, the refugee, the elected official - and love them.

What might it look like if justice came down like waters? What would it mean if the ever flowing stream of righteousness flowed through our culture?

Water has the power to wash away, and it has the power to nourish. As people of faith, we proclaim that righteousness is a mainstay of God's kingdom. How do we feed and nourish those signs of righteousness, of justice, of peace so that the Kingdom will continue to grow in our hearts and in our world?

The same questions that Amos asks the people of Israel ring true to us today in 2017: "*Why do we want this?*"

The Day of Yahweh has not come yet, and the only way that justice might roll is in your loving hands. There's still time. May justice roll in you, and in all of us, like a mighty stream. Amen.