

The Gospel of Woe
A Sermon At Trinity Episcopal Saint Louis
Matthew Elia / 28.IX.2025

In the name of the Triune Lord — who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — one God and Mother of us all. Amen.

1

Hear the first word of today's lesson from Amos: *Alas!* "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria" (Amos 6.1a). Alas. An old-timey word, hard to take seriously. The other word the translators use gets us closer to the *feeling* of the passage: *Woe*. *Woe!* to those who are at ease in Zion, *Woe* to those who feel secure on Mount Samaria.¹ Woe sounds archaic too, to be fair, maybe a little jokey. (When I saw the texts I was going to have to figure out how to preach this week, I thought...obviously...*woe is me*.) But the word *woe* still grabs us, drags us inside the feeling and sound and power of Amos. Its meaning, like all words, is defined by its use. And *woe* is for lamenting the dead. Its use—is grief.² In the book of First Kings we read: "And he laid the body in [the] grave; and they mourned over him, saying, 'Woe, my brother!'" (1 Kings 13.30). Woe, my brother. Grammatically, *woe* is an interjection: neither noun nor verb, less a word than a sound, a scream. The interjection isn't just an especially lively word in a still-orderly sequence—it is the *interruption* of order itself. *Woe!* Some translators, I love this, simply render it: *Ah!* (As in, *ah!* My brother. Ah, those who are at ease in Zion...) Woe: the disrupting word, the interrupting word, the word of grief.

2

Woe grabs you as a preacher, since your task is to listen to the word, and to proclaim the word as good news. As good news. What is the good news in *woe*? *How* can woe be made into good news? That is our central challenge as we wrestle with the holy text this morning: How can woe be good news?

There's a move preachers can try here, working the lectionary a certain way. I tried it out. I was going to say: Well, yes, it's woe and judgment and grief over there [point to lectern, where xxx read Amos], but now let us turn to the gospel reading for our good news [gesture to the center], where Venerable Brother Harry will read us today's gospel lesson, and surely Harry will give us some reassuring and comforting words from Luke. [Clears throat, disapproving look.] But Harry instead told us about Lazarus. Oh no. The rich man. In hell. Torment, agony, he's begging for water, pleading for water, he's being told by Abraham *no water for you*. Ok, so that's not going to help us too much. Especially because the rich man says: What of my brothers, Abraham? Make Lazarus go warn them! [Astonishing, right: even from the flames he thinks he can boss Lazarus around.] But *no*, Abraham says to him—speaking through brother Harry from the center of the room—*no, no*, and Abraham points a single bony finger back to the lectern: “Your brothers have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He leads us straight back here, delivers us into Amos’s awful embrace. *Woe*.

The first thing to know about Amos: he's not a professional. There *were* professional prophets in his day—the 8th century before Christ—career prophets who trained in a guild, got paid for their work.³ Not Amos. “I am no prophet,” he tells the priest of the state later in the story, who's grown tired of his woe and tells him to get lost, “I am no prophet,” he says, “nor [am I] a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (7.14). He's a sheep breeder, and an arborist.⁴ One scholar notes that “while some of the other prophets come from a priestly background, [Amos] is of peasant stock, and yet literate.”⁵ It's dangerous, it turns out, to have literate peasants. Because this strange herdsman-poet is not just an angry peasant, but a master of literary form: a master of re-working the traditions of his people inside the vision he has been shown by God, a vision he sums up in this one hard word: *Woe*. Woe to those at ease. Woe to those who feel secure. Why is he angry? Why woe?

He's angry—to put it very plainly—because of brutal economic injustice.

We heard it in the reading from Amos last week: “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land...[you that] practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals... The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds” (8.4-7).

Amos speaks woe to the affluent and the comfortable, but not simply for the bare fact of their affluence and comfort. It is because the life they enjoy—their ivory beds, the bowls of wine, the endless lounging—did not drop from the sky. It was got *through the immiseration of the poor*. Again, very important: what Amos sees is not just wealth inequality. It is wealth here, *achieved through* poverty over there. Health here, *through* sickness over there. Good life here—*through death and agony and exploitation over there*.

5

The great Abraham Joshua Heschel says “There is no society to which Amos’ words would not apply.”⁶ And this is true; no society this side of Eden is free of injustice. It’s why Amos hits us so hard, us here, in 21st century global capitalism. But we risk misunderstanding Amos if we imagine—as we moderns are prone to do—that his society was simple and static. Or timeless and without change. Instead, historical research shows us that what Amos confronted was precisely that most terrifying and world-making thing: a new *system*.

In Amos’s day, the times, they were a-changin’. What was emerging was a new “centralized system of commodity agriculture controlled” by the state. The old ways, a subsistence economy of cooperating villages in regional networks, were being forcibly replaced by a new way of “intensified and specialized agriculture.” “[This] new system was designed to maximize production of the three most important commodities: grain to feed the cities [but also] wine and olive oil, the more expensive products, [made] to satisfy...the taste for luxury now cultivated among the few who were rich.”⁷ This new system, with its new way of life—luxury for the few, got by immiseration of the many—was not timeless and not random, and it was also not universal. Scholars point to the Omride kingdom, existing nearby at the same time, which enjoyed by contrast a “*general prosperity*,” shared more widely than in the Israelite system Amos denounced, where wealth was concentrated in the hands of the royal court and its officials, while roughly 90% of the population struggled as small farmers.⁸

So Amos speaks woe to economic injustice, yet even to call the injustice ‘economic’ risks imagining that Amos saw reality as we do: sliced up into separate zones called the economy and politics and religion and society. But Amos is a herder of sheep, and a tender of trees, and he understands the crisis of his nation as an *integrated* cosmic-ecological crisis: as economic *and* religious, as spiritual *and* physical. The word *’adāmā*—meaning soil, or arable land—occurs with greater frequency in Amos than in any other book of the Bible.⁹ And in the soil, Amos sees that violence to the land and violence to the poor are one. In the soil, Amos sees that a system that is brutal to the sheep’s body is also brutal to the body of the tree, also brutal to the body of the poor, and thus is an affront to the Creator who is intimately present to animal, land, and the oppressed. Amos sees crisis, and Amos sees it as *one* crisis—linking soil to the soul. Amos sees it, and says *Woe*.

6

And it is this which allows us to hear Amos moving inside the room today. For in this Season of Creation, we too can begin to see in our world, that there is no separating out of our moral and spiritual crises from our physical and ecological violence. The poisoned land and the exploited farmworker cry out together; the rising seas and the deported refugee both say *woe* to this system, this imperial mode of life. That phrase—the imperial mode of life—is from the reading we’re looking at together this week in our Formation class, “God, Race, and the Ecology of Justice,” which meets at noon on Sundays (please join us). And there, we’ve been working together to understand how, in our time, paying attention to our way of life—what we eat and drink, how we use our money, how we live—connects us to, *implicates* us in harm, violence, and exploitation, both nearby and in far-flung global systems. But it also alerts us to how we might begin to resist such systems. Finding counter-imperial ways to live, is never easy, never simple. I hope you’ll join us there as we get into the practical dimensions of resisting systems that—like the one Amos denounces—secure wealth and ease over here, by inflicting misery and death over there. But the first practical step, the most practical question of all, is always to try to hear the word of God—and to hear in it good news, even in woe.

7

Systems of violent exploitation can seem endless, like they'll go on forever. But Amos says *woe!* and woe is an interjection, and an interjection is always the *interruption of business as usual*. Woe is good news because it is *God's interruption*—*Woe is God entering into God's broken creation, our broken world*. Woe means that God will not leave the poor at the mercy of the rich forever. Woe is the interrupting word, the disrupting word, and woe *is* God's holy interruption of our systems of death. How awful it would be if God left us alone to ourselves. How awful it would be if God abandoned the poor and the land to be trampled down and extracted by the rich forever. We do not have to *make* the woe of Amos into good news. It is *already* good news for Lazarus, already good news for the poor, already good news for us *if* we are willing to align ourselves with the work God is doing to interrupt and transform and heal and repair. The good news is that when you join in the revolt of the poor against their oppressors, you are joining in the work of the creation and its creator. And when you defend the creation from harm, you are participating in God's holy interjection, joining in as God brings to grief the systems that deal death to our world.

The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas once said the interjection in human speech is what barking is to a dog, what the roar is to a lion. It signals lack of full rational control, much as the word 'pain' conveys the concept of pain, while the interjection '*agh!*' conveys its actual sensation.¹⁰ No accident, then, that Amos is always insisting we hear God's voice as fully joined to the pain of creation, joined to the pain of the poor, joined to the pain of the land and the human and the animal:

"The lion has roared;" Amos says:

"who will not fear?

The Lord GOD has spoken;

who can but prophesy?" (3.8)

[2,121 words]

Notes

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets: A Introduction* (Harper, 1962), 28.

² *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 361. [Link](#).

³ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 2, Prophets: A Translation with Commentary* (Norton, 2019), 1274.

⁴ Amos, together with his contemporary Hosea, are—according to the scholar Ellen Davis—“probably the world’s first agrarian writers.” Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 120.

⁵ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 2, Prophets: A Translation with Commentary* (Norton, 2019), 1201-2.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets: A Introduction* (Harper, 1962), 3.

⁷ Davis, 122-23.

⁸ Davis, 208.

⁹ That is, with greater density relative to the total number of words. Davis, 209.

¹⁰ WORDS OF FIRE AND FRUIT: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PRAYER WORDS IN THE "CLOUD OF
"UNKNOWNING Author(s): DANIEL MCCANN Source: *Medium Ævum*, 2015, Vol. 84, No. 2 (2015), pp. 213-230
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