TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

November 15, 2020

*“Do You Hear What I Hear?”* Amos 5:18-24

Yes, I know it is still too early for Christmas carols, but this passage reminds me of the carol, *Do You Hear What I Hear?* I guess this is because the first question readers usually ask when they read or hear this passage is: why is God so angry, or we have said: this is the “angry God” of the Old Testament!

Throughout the centuries, this angry god has been feared and has frightened us. So, we have tried to appease the anger of this terrifying god—we have tried to curry favor or bribe this god with all sorts of offerings and minutely proscribed behaviors.

Failing that, we have hidden ourselves away from this god, or we have turned our backs on god—anything to escape being “victimized” by such a god; a god who is so hard to please, so easy to enrage, and so devastating when angered.

What a sad predicament to be in—to feel so small and powerless against a raging-bull of a god.

We are, said the Rev. Jonathan Edwards, “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” He famously said this in a sermon to his congregation in North Hampton, Massachusetts, in 1741. For the Rev. Edwards, God is all that keeps us from being dragged to hell by an eagerly waiting, voracious Satan. Only God’s hand prevents us from sliding into the arms of the devil, himself, while we are on this side of the grave.

When we die, said the Rev. Edwards, it will be too late to avail ourselves of this provision of God, so off to hell we go, and the ever-flowing waters mentioned at the end of this passage are a threat of flooding waters that will carry away all who are disobedient and sinful. It is this God we think of when we read passages such as this one from Amos.

The odd thing is that the threat of punishment we heard at the end of the passage is the same verse made famous for its promise of equality by another preacher some two hundred and twenty years after Edwards.

I am, of course, talking about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who famously invoked that final verse as he stood before the multitudes on the Washington Mall on August 28, 1963. On that day, Dr. King preached his “I Have a Dream” sermon to thousands gathered to hear his message of hope.

After listing the many horrors of “living life in America while black,” Dr. King responded to the question of when (or if) he, and the rest of the people agitating for equality were ever going to be satisfied. “When are we going to be satisfied,” Dr. King said. To this, Dr. King told us, and the world:

*“…we will not be satisfied until* “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” [v. 24]

The people that day in 1963 heard this proclamation of Scripture, and their courage was reinvigorated, and they redoubled their determination to go on. They, and we, heard it as hope, as a promise of a better time when all—including people of color—are going to enjoy the blessing of justice and equality. And no wonder, as the image is that of a dry riverbed that is suddenly gushing with the life-giving water, with *living water*.

Dr. King experienced this passage as God’s promise of the inevitability that one day we will all receive—equally—that which we all need to live and thrive.

In uttering that verse before the thousands who heard it that warm August day in Washington D.C., I have no doubt that Dr. King meant us to hear his hope and his excitement that such a promise can and should inspire.

For Dr. King, the water in those ever-flowing streams, those mighty streams, is that which is going to satisfy the longings of so many who were dying of thirst for justice, who were languishing in the wastelands of discrimination, who longed for equality in areas of life such as:

* Equality in education—this means that all schools are funded and staffed equally so that all children and youth have a chance to develop their God-given gifts;
* Equality in employment opportunity—so that all who have the education and the gifts will be considered equally for all available jobs, and may advance as far as their grit and drive will take them;
* Equality in housing—so that no one is turned away from living in any area they can afford to live because of their race, or the color of their skin, their religion, or their sexual orientation, or any of the other things that divide us;
* Equality…of simply going about the business of daily living without being afraid that someone will stop you because they believe their rights and privilege out-weigh or are more important than yours.

I hope we can begin to see how this passage can mean different things to different people. For the people who heard and remember it from Dr. King’s speech, we hear it as promise of a bright future of equality for all people.

For the folks who heard it from the Rev. Edwards, and for thousands of years before him, they heard it as a threat that the angry God of the Old Testament was going to wash away sinners in torrents of floods, destroying everything in its path.

It does not take too much imagination to figure out which interpretation most of us would like to hold on to. I, for one, believe that God’s greatest desire for all of God’s beloved people is that we live our lives with our God-given dignity and promise; that we should all enjoy the freedom to use the gifts God has given us; that we should all be able to live together without fear of being dominated or having our humanity denied or diminished in any shape, form, or fashion. I am holding on to Dr. King’s vision of the quenching, refreshing streams—the living waters given to us by God.

However, I cannot dismiss the Rev. Edwards’ interpretation. I do not believe it is irrelevant. I believe what he and Amos were telling us that we have a choice.

Indeed, when we turn back and look at what the prophet Amos was saying, we see that he was calling the people to make a different choice about how they were going to live with each other. He was calling them back to a life of reverence and faithfulness to the God who had already done so much for, who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land.

Amos was telling them that the path they had chosen was going to lead them to destruction. He saw them as being led away from the God of their ancestors whom God had gathered and rescued, to a collection of people who did not live-out of that gratitude. Indeed, they had become people that did not care for the poor, that turned away from generosity and hospitality toward all people.

He told them that the very worship they still offered God was empty of meaning so long as they continued to withhold compassion and generosity to others. He promised them that so long as their words and actions did not match, God would not be honored, and they would have removed themselves from God’s presence and care.

Amos knew, and wanted all people to know the God who brings people together so we may thrive by helping each other—*this* is the way to worship and glorify God.

We have agency, says Amos. We can make our lives a garden or a grave. We must choose.

However, it is going to depend a lot on what you have heard in this passage. Have you heard hope, or condemnation? What do you want to hear?

I pray we have all heard God’s hope.

I pray that the worship we offer to God matches the decisions we make—individually, in our private lives, and together—and that the gestures of compassion we offer each other, and the actions we take toward justice and equality will be our life’s path.

I pray that the effort and sacrifices we can make will give rise to a life together that is equal and just and filled with love for God and for others.

I pray we will come to delight in God’s love that longs to hear our true songs of praise, the God who has seen and heard all of the dreams and aspirations of God’s beloved people, and longs to gather us into God’s love—all of us together—every moment of our lives. This is what I pray for, for

May God bless all of us with this hope and determination, and may we listen for God’s loving call to us now, and always. Amen.