



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

Stinging Truth

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 9, 2014
The Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Amos 5:18-24 and Matthew 25:1-13*

*Thus says the Lord, I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Amos wrote these compelling words and the others we heard read a few moments ago in his voice, but he attributed them to God. Then as now such a claim definitively ratchets up the conversation. You will not be surprised to hear that Amos was not terribly popular. Living in the mid-700's of the era before the time of Jesus, Amos was an early voice in the prophetic tradition, a group of Hebrew preachers—we call them prophets though they were less foretellers of the future than preachers about justice. To some, they were courageous whistleblowers; to others, they were a bunch of whiners, who just couldn't enjoy a good thing when they saw it.

In so many ways, it truly was the best of times. The Northern Kingdom of Israel and its southern section, the Kingdom of Judah, were essentially at peace with one another. This was no small accomplishment, intra-tribal conflicts being what they are; and beyond that, it was a time when Israel's hostile enemies were unusually quiet. King Jeroboam was a hero; he had had huge success in reclaiming what his forebears had lost and had even added a bit of new land to the kingdom, including a part of what is modern Syria. Nationalism was strong and flags were flying.

And the economy was booming. The greatest merchants and seafarers of the age, the Phoenicians, were good friends of the kingdom. This meant the supply of high-end luxury goods was at an all-time high for the rich; beautiful, lavish goods that had never been seen in Israel were all the rage to those who could purchase them. It was a golden age, almost as grand as that of Solomon's time; and it had been a long time in returning.

There was, in fact, only one real problem: income inequality was also at an all-time high. It was a great time to be alive if you happened to be rich, but it was a terrible time to be eking out a living on the other and much more populous end of the economic spectrum. Poverty was deep and wide; and any almsgiving to the poor, derived from Jewish religious teaching, was perfunctory and not nearly enough to assure anything like a reasonably decent life for people on the margins.

Amos was a shepherd before he became a prophet and a keeper of sycamore trees, jobs that were fulltime, I suppose, but jobs he reluctantly put aside once he began to understand the imperative that God seemed to be giving him. The prophet business is inherently dicey; anyone who sets out to be a prophet, who fancies himself or herself as one, probably needs to be avoided. I don't think Amos thought he had any choice, which is probably why he was so good at it. In that wonderful biblical way, Amos's name means "burden bearer," making us wonder which came first the man or the story. But, of course, it doesn't matter, for either way, once he got the message, he took to the streets—streets, which were broad and glorious on one side of town but not so much where the majority of God's people lived.

Though he said it in a variety of ways, the essential message of Amos was, "People of God, you have lost your way. You feast on rich food and plenteous wines, lolling about in unimaginable luxury. You accept your good fortune as though it has come to you through hard work, when in fact you benefit from an unjust system that keeps the rich, rich and the poor, poor. Your spiritual and governmental leaders are corrupt and easily and regularly bribed. While

you continue to practice your religion, your observance of it is self-centered and self-congratulatory, so pleased you are with your proud assemblies and beautiful music. You have become morally and spiritually soft and you make God sick.”

As I may have mentioned, Amos was not wildly popular with the powerful crowd. He, as the other prophets, believed without question in a God of love but also in a God of judgment. He/they believed that God would only tolerate excess and abuse of the sanctity of life for so long. In fact, as all with even a cursory knowledge of Judaic history know, the theme in this story is a recurrent one. It’s a cycle of God’s blessing God’s people, followed by a time of their disobedience, when they fail to care for the poorest among them, which almost always occurs with a simultaneous upswing in the idolatization of success, accumulation, and comfort, and is then followed by an episode of God’s smacking them back in line. It is told over and over in Hebrew scripture, and our own story, the Christian part of the Judaic-Christian tradition, folds this understanding of the way of God and humankind into the story of Jesus.

If we are totally honest, we find this kind of thinking to be archaic and distasteful in the 21st century. Do we believe that God acts like that? Do we believe in the first place that God bestows huge blessings on one group, a chosen people, to the eternal detriment of another un-chosen group? And then to manage God’s people, do we really believe that through pestilence and despair, manipulated by the hand of God and meted out upon those who disobey, God reestablishes God’s rule? I can only speak for myself, but no, no, no—a thousand times no. Such thinking represents an ancient people’s genuine desire to make sense of life, but it is in no way prescriptive for our understanding of God.

And, yet, please hear me when I say that with all my heart I **absolutely** believe that there is immense relevance and power in Amos’s words from 2800 years ago to us living right now in 2014. My guess is that all of us gathered in this room would probably agree that there are unmistakable similarities between what Amos decried and what exists in our world today. And I wish I could tell you with clarity what we ought to do about it—not because I am so generous and loving, but because if I could tell you, I would know myself. I wish I could tell you that one political party clearly gets it and another clearly doesn’t, but that would be way too simple and not true. I wish I could tell you that if you give enough to St. Bart’s, you won’t have to worry about the rest of your priorities. (I **really** wish I could tell you that, and I may at some point closer to December 31st.)

So do we give up and just live our lives as though we have no moral and spiritual center? Not for a moment. It is complicated to live faithfully, but there are some things that though difficult are crystal clear:

- ❖ Taking care of poor people has been understood as crucial to knowing God at every step of our Judaic-Christian history; though our understanding of it is always partial, it never goes away;
- ❖ Justice is essential to the presence of, let alone the enjoyment of, peace; one without the other is always short-lived and fragile;
- ❖ Having way, way, way too much stuff is hardly ever good for our souls; determining what is way too much, not to mention way, way too much, is unendingly difficult and fraught with all sorts of problems, chief among them the lack of self-awareness and the plenitude of denial; but we must struggle with the question;
- ❖ And finally judgment does exist. I don’t believe in some distant day of judgment that will divide silly bridesmaids from wise ones, sheep from goats, or any such things. But I **know** that judgment exists; I know it in my life. It is not that God sends us to hell now or ever; it is we who choose to live there—the hell of our own making, living vapidly and frantically as people with no center, losing our souls along the way.

Amos’s is a rough message, now as it was then; and it is one we need to hear. But with all my heart, I know it is not all the story—and so do you. Every day, every hour, every second, God tugs us toward what is true and real in our lives, toward what really matters. And though we often **get** lost, we are **not** lost: we are in the process of being found, of being transformed. God never gives up on us, and by God neither should we. This is our journey, and we need to get on with it. In the name of God: *Amen*.

©2014 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bart’s and its life of faith and mission write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022