

The Counter-Cultural Call Of God

*A Sermon On:
Amos 3: 1-15*

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Listen, oh my children.
Disobedient, arrogant wandering children – listen.
We've gone so far.
We've done so much.
We were so close.

Children – children of Israel, listen!
Listen as if your very life depended on it.
Because.....
.....well
.....it does.

And so begins our reading, the message from the prophet Amos to the people Israel - a message going straight upstream, as it were;
straight against the common understanding and culture of their day.
a message very much counter to the culture of our day, too.

Somehow, Israel had slipped into the notion that what the prophet spoke from the pulpit in church, and how they behaved in their shops and homes during the week were totally unrelated — elements of two separate universes.

Somehow the one didn't matter to the other - even if the one was totally opposed to the other. Still it didn't matter.

And in a series of rhetorical questions, Amos tells them, "*think again.*"

Israel, if you think that your economic policies, your judicial practices, your social caring systems – if you think that these can go on however you want and that no one will notice, think again.

Listen, oh my children, says the one who notices.
I, the Lord have noticed.

*You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you for all your sins. (v.2)*

The word "*chosen*" is an ancient legal word. In other places it is translated "*known*" - as in "*I have known you.*"
It means a legal recognition and relationship between two parties.
It is the language of covenant.
The same word is used of the intimate bonding between husband and wife. They commit together, choose each other, bond together, know one another.

In verse 1, then, the prophet is reminding the people of their history.
In verse 2 he is calling them to remember their covenant with God.

Where they have been in the past matters.
Promises made in the past matter.
They matter with each other.
How much more do they matter when made with God!

Can we understand that, today?

And, if you're sitting there saying, "*Of course! That makes sense. How can it be otherwise?*" I hope that you appreciate how out of synch your thoughts are with the prevailing culture of our nation.

Post-modern culture has dispensed with truth. It has trashed absolutes.

Everything is incredibly relative. *"If it works for you, for now, then great. But it may not be so for me, or for tomorrow. And we'd better make room for that"* – so says the post-modern mind. *"Don't tell me that I'm wrong - for there is no such thing."*

To which the prophet, and God, say, *"Surprise!"*

When bonds are made, they matter.

When promises are uttered, and commitments established, they last.

God holds to them - allowing us to sing *"Great Is Thy Faithfulness..... morning by morning new mercies I see, Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not, as Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be - Great is Thy faithfulness!"*

And the Covenant God of faithfulness expects His people to be faithful, too.

Just as a husband has every right to expect his wife to be faithful in love.

And a wife every right to expect full devotion and singular faithfulness from him.

Brothers and sisters, the greatest attribute of God, according to the Scriptures is listed in 1 John 4.16: **GOD IS LOVE.**

It is in love that He created the world.

In love He made the human race.

In love He walked and talked with them in the cool of the evening.

In love He promised that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the seed of the serpent.

It was all **in love.**

And it is in love that God seeks and forms relationships with human beings.

Not that He **needs** it.

He simply **wants** it -- wants it in love.

It is in love that He established a deep covenant love bond with the children of Israel. It was a forever-to-be covenant; a relationship as close as husband and wife - that intimate, that tender.

Amos alludes to all that

to that great Heavenly-Earthly covenant relationship

not only by using this special word in v.2 for *"chosen"*, but also by using the covenant name for God in this prophecy.

Do you see in the verses of this passage where the word **LORD** is found? Notice the spelling, all in upper case? That is an indication to the reader that in the original Hebrew manuscripts the letters JHWH were found; Jewish code letters for the personal name of God, which is alternately translated into English as Jahweh, or Jehovah.

That name, Jahweh, is the name that God only revealed to **HIS** special covenant people, to his beloved.

But don't let those images lull you into a false sense of complacency, of cheap security, a **carelessness** about the relationship between you and God.

For as real as the gentle parenting image of God is, so real **also** is the fierce, raging image of God which Amos prophesies.

The God who whispers gently, also roars in horrible rage when His covenant is violated, when His heart-to-heart relationship rejected and ignored.

God is not careless about His covenant with His people.

He plays for keeps.

"Therefore will I punish you for all your sins."

Oh, Israel - don't you see?

v.4&5: When an animal falters, the lion catches it and roars.

When a bird blunders into a snare, it snaps.

In other words: Some things have inevitable consequences. They can't be avoided. The one leads automatically to the other. You can count on it.

And one of those tied-together things is well-being of your lives, of your cities... and God's blessings or punishments:

V.6: "*When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?*"

You've had disaster after disaster, people. Now catch a hint and recognize that those disasters are the inevitable result of the punishment of God; they are the affect of your ignoring God, and Him coming down hard on you.

If you read ahead to chapter 4 you'll see examples of the sorts of things that were occurring, sent by God as warnings and punishment to Israel:

crop failures, drought, blight and mildew, insect plagues and more.

Israel had, apparently, endured all these hardships and looked at them as meaningless events; items unrelated to their attitudes and behavior. They were simply coincidence, natural freaks, a combination of bad luck and poor timing.....

Amos 3 tells them, "*Think again!*"

God will not allow His people to wander away without a whisper.

No more than a loving husband will watch his wife wander off with another man without hurt and rage;

No more than a loving parent allows their children to wander off without a word or challenge.

V.8: *The lion has roared - who will not fear?*

God's wrath is as real as His love.

In fact His wrath is born **out of** His love. It is a wrath born out of rejection; a wrath of holy jealousy.

While Jahweh is provoked with the disobedience and atrocities of the heathen nations, nothing is so painful to Him, nothing builds so much rage as the arrogant disobedience, the nonchalant disregard of Him by the people of the covenant; the ones for whom He had done so much, to whom He had provided Salvation.

So the Lion roars.

God cries out in His heavenly jealousy that will tolerate no spiritual mistresses.

Post-Modern Canada:

When God speaks we **HAD BETTER** take notice.

For when God speaks, what He commands **WILL** be accomplished.

The **cause** of God's voice is never without **effect**.

Look no further than creation to see that truth.

And God spoke.... and behold it was very good!

Hear Isaiah 55:11 where God says, "*so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*"

As we approach the Christmas season we remember the greatest way that God ever spoke.

God's "*Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" [John 1:14]

The God of covenant faithfulness brings to completion all the words of the prophets. The promise made in the garden - to bring One who would crush the head of the serpent - now comes to completion.

A completion that we were able to celebrate in Holy Communion this morning under the shadow of the cross.

We who are gathered here this evening, we who form the covenant family at Calvin Christian Reformed Church, we are recipients of the Word.

And Amos' prophetic word lands in our laps.

God has spoken.

Consider the matter carefully.

Do we listen? Do we take Him seriously? Do we care... really?

Oh, we could turn to the secular, atheistic world around us and shake our heads. We could point accusing fingers at the abuses, at the lack of respect for the Lord's name, at the blatant idolatry that pervades our land, at injustices of various sorts. We could do it.

BUT

That's not the place to begin. It's not the first item on the menu. Job #1 is to look in a mirror and ask, "God has spoken. Do I fear?"

Hear Amos - God's call comes **first**, and most firmly, to His covenant people.

THAT'S job #1 friends;
before all the finger-pointing, and smug head-shaking.

Job #1 -- looking carefully inside self and figuring out just how **BIG** an influence I am allowing God to be; how much room I am giving Him in my heart and mind; how willingly and lovingly I am responding to the Covenant God??

to Jahweh who has sent His one and only Son, so that I, believing in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life in the great eternal splendor of my covenant Father's home!!

Does my relationship with God affect my life as much as my marriage does?

Is it as important as my job?

Do I consider it as much as I consider the opinion and value the relationship with my friends and neighbors?

In our relationships together as church family – does the Word and Will of God have primary sway?

Because, you see, it **does** matter!

No matter what our culture will tell us.

And one of the best ways we can measure how we're doing is in a second incredibly counter-cultural call of the prophet.

Did you notice what Amos condemns?

Can you see what it is that bothers the Lord about the lives of Israel?

Can you see in there any talk about lack of temple worship attendance?

Do you see condemnation for lower giving patterns?

How about skipping devotions for some time?

Nothing there, right?

Interesting how many, I dare say **most**, of the measures that we so commonly lay out on the table as baseline measurements of some sort on the state of our spiritual well-being and covenant faithfulness,

at least the ones we'd pull out first when asked to quickly rhyme off a "top 10" list of spiritual health indicators.

none of them end up making it into this chapter..... or into any portion of this entire prophecy, for that matter!

While I've been talking, I hope you've been scanning the chapter.
Have you found it?
The measuring indicator of Amos?

Post-modern Canada may tell you that the best things in life are found by following your own path; do your own thing; live and let live; each to their own.

The upshot of that being not only that I may exercise my **rights** above all, but also that my **responsibilities** to those around me have diminished.....

.....or disappeared.

It's an idea that has left our nation fragmented, and full of lonely isolated people.

Amos 3 tells us that God measures our covenant faithfulness to Him, what I'll call **vertical faithfulness**, in large measure by our **horizontal faithfulness**, by our faithfulness to those with whom He has placed us, those that Jesus calls "our neighbors;"

The ones of whom Jesus said in Matthew 25, "as much as you have done [or not done] this unto the least of these, you have done [or not done] it unto me."

In 3:9 the call goes out to the "fortresses" of Ashdod and Egypt. The word "fortresses" there actually refers to large multi-story homes that the very rich lived in - much like later European castles. They could house the rich man and his family AND his army for protection. From there he controlled the surrounding countryside.

Amos is calling the rich and powerful of other lands to witness the destruction of the rich and powerful of Israel.

The great unrest of v.9 is the result of the way they have plundered the poor; the way they have abused and twisted justice for their own gain.

V.10 says "They do not know how to do right..."

The word for "do right" means to do "what is straightforward, honest and true" as opposed to what is deceptive and false. It is used by the prophet Isaiah to mean "justice." Legally it means - "proper practice in court and trade."

It is basic human care; respect for and defense of the lives of the little people.

That's what God looks for.

That's what tugs at His holy heart.

And the lack of that in Israel raises holy fury.

Their economy will be destroyed.

Their fancy places of worship would be torn to bits.

Their sham of holiness would be revealed for what it was.

The lion has roared - who will not fear?

The Sovereign Lord has spoken - who can but prophesy?

Brothers and sisters,

Hear the word of the prophet - the Word of God to us.

When God plays, He plays for keeps.

When He binds Himself to a people in Love, He **means it!**

And He demands that His people mean it, too.

Mean it - and show it in tangible ways.

And so tonight, as you hear the voice of God roaring in your heart, listen to it carefully.

Listen to the roar of the Lion!

And then run. Run as fast as you can. Run straight into the arms of the One who is called the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5.5); the One who is also the Lamb that was slain to take away the sins of the world.

For those who bow down to, and who fear with a holy fear the roaring of the Lion, who take God seriously and submit every corner of their lives in active obedience to Him, are also those who will, one day in glory, be able to sing the song of the Lamb.