

A Pep Rally in Bethel

Amos 2: 6-16

Rev. Philip Parker

February 2, 2025

How many of you remember those pep rallies from your days in high school? Everyone gathered in the grandstands or bleachers of the football field with the cheerleaders and the football team dressed in their uniforms. Sometimes even the high school band would show up and begin playing fight songs. Then the cheering began with the cheerleaders chanting the strengths of the home team while depreciating the abilities of their opponents. Gradually an atmosphere of spontaneous excitement began to take hold, a spirit of joyous anticipation for the upcoming game. If everyone cheered loudly enough, victory would be assured on the gridiron.

Amos, of course, didn't know anything about football or pep rallies, but he did know something about people. In order to get their attention, he'd have to come up with something out of the ordinary. He had an important message to deliver and he needed a sensational way to get it across. That's when a really neat idea came to mind. The people in Bethel, indeed throughout the country of Israel, had a pretty high opinion of themselves. They thought they were a whole lot better than the other nations around them. So why not start by bringing a message of divine judgement against these neighboring countries. Dressed in the humble garb of a prophet, he would immediately command the people's attention if he stood in front of their temple and told everyone about what God was going to do to those nations which surrounded them. Then once he had their undivided attention, he could get down to business, telling the folks in Bethel what the Lord had in store for them.

So Amos stepped up to the place where prophetic messages were delivered and began to speak. He started off with the nation of Syria and their capital city of Damascus, "This is what the Lord says: 'For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not turn back My wrath. Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth, I will send fire upon the house of Hazael that will consume the fortresses of Ben-Hadad. I will break down the gate of Damascus; I will destroy the king who is in the Valley of Aven and the one who holds the scepter in Beth Eden. The people of Aram will go into exile in Kir'" (Amos 1:2-5). Those who heard what Amos was saying were ecstatic. Syria had been one of their fiercest enemies for centuries. In fact, they had conquered and severely abused those Israelites living along their northern border in Galilee. To hear that the Lord was going to destroy the Syrians and send them into exile was welcome news.

Those listening to Amos said to themselves, "Perhaps this shabby foreigner from down south really does have a Word from the Lord." Amos continued, "This is what the LORD says 'For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom, I will send fire upon the walls of Gaza that will consume their fortresses. I will destroy the king of Ashdod and the one who holds the scepter in Ashkelon. I will turn My hand against Ekron, till the last of the Philistines is dead,' says the Sovereign LORD (Amos 1:6-8)." The Philistines had been around for a long time occupying a number of cities along the southern Mediterranean seacoast. Israel had fought them over and over again, including David's triumph over Goliath. Nevertheless, they were still in the slave trading business, selling Israelites into bondage to the Edomites whenever they had an opportunity. To be rid of them would be a dream come true.

The crowd listening to Amos was beginning to warm up to this prophet from Judea, especially when he next addressed the people of Tyre, those merchants who lived up north along the Mediterranean Sea. Amos said, "This is what the LORD says, 'For three sins of Tyre, and even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. Because she sold whole communities of captives to Edom, disregarding a treaty of brotherhood, I will send fire upon the walls of Tyre that will consume her fortresses'" (Amos 1:9-10). Tyre had been an ally of Israel dating all the way back to Solomon. They had provided both lumber and skilled craftsmen to help build the temple in Jerusalem. But now those ancient treaties had been broken and like the Philistines, they had sold not only individuals, but entire communities into slavery. The Lord needed to teach those Phoenicians in Tyre that you don't mess around with God's people. The growing crowds in Bethel were delighted to cheer Amos on as he delivered his message.

In fact, more and more people joined the multitudes who were listening to Amos as he continued his diatribes against the nations surrounding Israel. They were really taking a shine to this itinerate prophet who spoke with such conviction and zeal. One after another he recited God's judgement against Edom for their unwarranted aggression, against Ammon for their disregard for pregnant women, against Moab for their desecration of the dead and then lastly against Judah, their southern neighbor. The people of Bethel were surprised to hear Amos speak of his own countrymen, charging them with disregarding God's laws and decrees as well as worshipping false gods. After all, they were fellow Hebrews, worshipping the same God.

Listening with eager anticipation, they were not prepared for what Amos was getting ready to proclaim. He cried out in a loud voice for all to hear, "This is what the LORD says, 'For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not run back My wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the

ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines” (Amos 2:6-8). The people listened in stunned silence as Amos went on to declare that the God who had blessed them in the past would now crush them like a cart collapsing under the weight of its load. It was literally a message too heavy to bear.

So what if anything does this account of Amos’ pep rally in Bethel have to say to us this morning? There are three things that we need to take to heart. First, just as in the days of Amos, we live in a dangerous world where a lot of bad things are happening. All around the globe people are being abused. Our enemies, like the new axis of evil—Russia, China, Iran and North Korea—are mistreating their own populations while trampling on the freedom of others. The horrific war in Ukraine, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, is but one example. Closer to home in places like Cuba and Venezuela people are also being trampled under the feet of oppressive regimes. Additionally, Christians are often being singled out for the most heinous treatment. Just recently I read an account of what took place in the African nation of Uganda. A family—father, mother and grown son—decided to turn from Islam and become Christians. Knowing the hostility of their Muslim neighbors, they tried not to attract too much attention. Nevertheless, after their former acquaintances found out that they were believers, they came one night and set their house on fire, burning to death the family inside.

Yes, bad things are happening all around the world and for that reason here is the second thing that this passage of Scripture says to us. God has a special place in His heart for the abused and the downtrodden. When individuals or nations take advantage of people and especially when they take advantage of His people, the Lord is not happy and He brings judgement against them. History bears this out. Of all the nations that Amos mentioned, every one of them met disastrous consequences soon after he delivered his prophesies. The Assyrian Empire swept in and conquered them all. The only one which survived was little Judea and even they almost didn’t make it. Had it not been for a godly king named Hezekiah, they too would have been vanquished.

Finally, here is the third thing we need to remember. During Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount he said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the same measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye” (Matthew 7:1-4)? That’s precisely what had taken place during Amos’ condemnation of all the other nations. The people of Bethel were all too anxious to recognize and

rejoice in the sins and shortcomings of other countries, without giving serious consideration to their own. The same thing can be true for us. Finding fault with others, but disregarding some of the same things that need to be changed in our own lives is a serious mistake, a mistake that God will not overlook.

In the weeks to come we're going to discover three things that were serious problems in the culture and way of life in ancient Israel, three things that Amos condemned in his prophetic messages. Then with the help of God's spirit of discernment, we're going to see if there are some things that need to be changed in our lives both individually, as a church family, and as a nation. These next three weeks may not be a pep rally, but they could prove to be the kind of experience that makes us a better and more godly people.