

We are in our second message in Amos. I trust that particularly those of you who have been here have had the opportunity to read through that Minor Prophet, one of the ten [prophetic books] at the end of the Old Testament. That is why it is called “minor”; it is called minor because it is short and small as opposed to the “major prophets” who have big long books. That is the only meaning of that term.

We got started last week looking at the same text, Amos 1:1-3:8. That was the reference last week. This week I am referencing a smaller section: Amos 1:3-2:3. This section deals with the various nations that surrounded Israel and Judah rather than dealing with Israel itself. That is where the word of God’s judgment is first directed. In the message we had last week I went no further than to note how God presented Himself through Amos. It is essential that we have a right perspective on that. God addresses Himself to Israel, the northern ten tribes, first as the Covenant God, Yahweh. If you were a Jew the minute you heard that name “Jehovah” or “Yahweh” you would know, the covenant God, the saving God, the God who rescued us out of Egypt; the God who has made us a chosen and favored people. That was the God that they delighted to hear about. But then the next thing that Amos does is he says that the Lord roars. The word for “roar” is, he roars as a lion about to kill. That tension is desired; that was exactly what God wants. It is for the people of God to feel a tension between the covenant God and the God who would roar like a lion as if He were ready to kill. Then the last was a reference to the fact that God is a God of fire. Fire symbolizes the holiness of God. It was the holiness of God that had been abandoned and compromised.

Today we take up this first word of judgment which we find in Amos 1:3-3:8. We will take this in three sections. Someone asked me last week, “Pastor, do you think the series in Amos will last longer than three weeks?” It will take me three weeks to get through the first verse! The next three weeks we will first take, today, 1:3-2:3 God’s word to the nations surrounding Israel. Next week will be Amos 2:4-16, it is God’s word to Judah and Israel, and I already know that message will be broken in half as God has a lot to say to each of the kingdoms. Then thirdly we will look at 3:1-8, we will look again at how God deals with us.

Amos tells us that God judges the nations of the world. It was not the case that any of the nations to whom Amos will now speak recognized the God of Israel. He was not their God. They did not consider themselves accountable to the God of Israel. What they actually believed was that if they could conquer and destroy Israel and Judah, they would essentially sort of wipe out the God of Israel and He would be irrelevant. This is the way things are in the world today as I am sure most of us know. It is not limited to foreign nations. All sorts of people, people that you and I know, hold firmly to the notion that if they don’t believe in God, then God has no power over them. That is an absurd idea. But it comes directly from what we now call the post-modern world view, which as a matter of fact is not all that different from the pagan world view into which the gospel was first delivered. In this world view, the post-modern world view that we walk through every time we turn on any form of media, this is the world we live in; in this post-modern world there is no actual truth. “Truth” is what you make it. “Truth” is something we make up and impose on the people and events around us. If something “works”, it is “true”. In this way we “make our own reality”. Post-modern historians say that the truth of Christianity or the truth of European liberalism is only the result of the historical happenstance that at a certain point in time Christianity and the Western nations “won”. Because they came out on top and they were the most powerful people, they wrote the histories and they justified who they were and what they did. If somebody else had won the wars, they would have written the histories, they would have written them differently; they would be the good guys.

I hope that we can see how nutty this is. But it is a very flattering kind of nuttiness, for it is rooted in the idea that there is no one ultimately in charge, no one to judge, no one to point out what is in fact real. At the same time this way of thinking leads to despair because there is no certainty, no clarity, no resolution. From the Islamic point of view if they can conquer us and wipe us out, they are the good guys. From the Communist point of view if they can conquer us and wipe us out, they are the good guys. You might recognize this state of mind; it was the state of

mind of Pilate when Pilate talked to Jesus and Jesus said all who listen to me listen to and hear the truth. How did Pilate respond? “What is truth?” In such a world truth makes no difference because it isn’t anything. The only thing that matters is power and people are led to despair.

Amos indicates as you read through Amos chapter 1 down through chapter 3, that the opinions of the surrounding nations were completely irrelevant as far as God was concerned. Therefore they should have been irrelevant as far as Israel and Judah were concerned. Likewise the opinions of people around us should be indifferent to us. We draw our understanding of truth, justice and righteousness from the Word of God. If our neighbor disagrees, we will attempt to explain, but we will not be dissuaded or altered in our understanding, even when the guns are pointed at us and they say, “Choose!”

Every nation, every people, every family has been created by God and is answerable to God. Open the Bible to Ephesians 3, for it is a critical understanding that needs to be driven in our hearts and minds if we are going to track with what Amos has to say, that is, what God has to say through His servant Amos. In Ephesians 3:14ff, Paul has this to say. He says, *“For this reason – do not be concerned for that reason; it relates to the letter that he wrote to the Ephesians - I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on the earth is named. . .”* If you know your Bible and you know the usage of the term “named”, it is the characteristics, the definition, the essential reality of everything that is named. What he is saying here is that it is God who names the people; it is God who names the families; it is God who ultimately names the nations of the world. Jeremiah, another prophet in the Old Testament, is told by God, “You are charged by Me to raise up and cast down kingdoms.” What this is saying is that our God is sovereign. He is sovereign over the nations as He is sovereign over us. We live under the hand of this sovereign God who is not deflected by anything that we do, but remains true to His purpose, His character and His will in all things.

The judgments however [in Amos] are not grounded in the revealed Law of God, the Ten Commandments. Rather the judgments that we hear are the principles of righteousness and goodness implanted in the consciousness of men through all creation. Paul refers to this in Romans 2:14-16. As the word of God comes through Amos and is directed to the nations surrounding Israel and Judah, this is the necessary foundation for our appreciating that word. In Romans 2:14-16 Paul writes: *“For when Gentiles who do not have the Law, by nature do what the Law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the Law. They show that the work of the Law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”* How many men will be judged by Jesus? All. What will be judged? It is that which is hidden in their hearts. The reach of God’s judgment through Christ Jesus is not limited to those who say “I believe in Jesus.” It reaches to all. That, beloved, is one reason you and I should seek to share the gospel with every person that we possibly can, because every person, whether they acknowledge Jesus or not will answer to Jesus. Therefore their only hope is by receiving the gospel of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other option!

Sometimes when we read Paul’s words as we do in Romans 1:18-23 we tend to narrowly limit what it is that they people of the world can know about God. Specifically we are unclear regarding anything like whether or not there is a universal moral law. This universal moral law for most of the period of time between the Late Roman Empire and the early Modern Period of history, when our nation was founded had a different name. It was called the law of nature or “Nature’s Law”. You might recognize this as part of the Declaration of Independence. Natural law played a large and critical role in advancing of the rule of law in nations, curbing the power of kings and aristocracies. This is what Paul wrote, beginning at verse 18:

“For the wrath of God – that is what we are going to look at when begin to see what Amos speaks – the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has

shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”

At first blush the reference to “eternal power and divine nature” does not appear to be specifically moral in its nature, a moral category; but as Paul goes on to immediately point out, what these nations have done is to break the first and most fundamental of all moral laws. That law is the proper worship of God. That comprises the first three of the Ten Commandments: you shall have no other gods before Me. Every one of these nations had other gods. You shall create no images to worship God. Every one of these nations created images with which to worship God. Lastly, you shall not take the name of God in vain. To take the name of God in vain is to treat God and speak of God and to treat divinity, the divine, the gods, in a way that is different from the character of God. Every one of these nations had done that. These are profound moral categories. When people error in this most fundamental level of moral behavior or consciousness, there are consequences. The reasons for this is not far to seek, for humanity is made in the image and likeness of God. So if I have a distorted picture of God, what is going to happen to my picture of humanity? If we deal wrongly with the Creator, we will deal wrongly with the creature He has made. By contrast, if we deal correctly with the Creator then we are likely to deal correctly with the creature that He has made. We will see in that creature the image of the Creator and we will recognize the moral imperative to honor the dignity of the creature upon which we look. Whether in our family or in our community or with the stranger and the people of other nations we will see in them the image of God and recognize moral imperatives to treat them in ways which affirm their moral worth. However, when the knowledge of God is repressed, the recognition of the inherent dignity of humanity is also repressed, and therefore men can stand people in front of guns and say, “Violate your conscience or be killed,” because they have no respect for the dignity of the human being. That is why we should never do that, even to our enemies. Let God judge; not us.

It is noteworthy that all six of these recorded judgments deal with man’s barbarity in dealing with his fellow man. As we read through the judgments that God speaks through Amos against each of these surrounding nations not once does he reference the Ten Commandments. Not once does He reference their proper worship of God. Every single reference is to the inhumane way in which they treat their fellow man. We should be thoughtful about this. What happened to Christians during the medieval crusades? What happened when the Christian armies marched out of Europe and came to the Christian City of Byzantium or Constantinople and instead of going on the infidels in Jerusalem they sacked the Christian City and raped its women?

With this much of an introduction let us consider the moral judgments of God against the nations, beginning with Damascus. Verse 3, *“Thus says the Lord; For three transgression of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazeal, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad. I will break the gate-bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and him who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Syria shall go into exile to Kir,” says the Lord.*” Syria was occasionally an ally of Israel; most of the time it was one of her most vicious enemies. The sin that He names is her excessive cruelty. That is the point of the reference to a sledge of iron threshing the people. The image of throwing bodies on the ground and taking an iron sledge and running it over their bodies is not meant as literal description; it is figurative language that captures something of the ferocity of Syria’s actions.

As we move through each of these six nations, we simply have to accept that all of these nations warred against one another. We may ask ourselves the question, “Why does God make no judgment about the warring of these nations?” He doesn’t; not a word. Amos gives no answer, just as the Old Testament gives no answer to the issue of

slavery. Why doesn't God say something about slavery? “No slaves!” Doesn't that degrade human beings? Yes, it does. But when you read through the Old Testament and the New you realize that what God does is to limit the severity of both. “That is not enough!” Right? The self-righteous heart of modernity looks down its lofty nose condemning the God of the Bible for failing to live up to our expectations. And what is the record of modernity in terms of its kindly treatment of our fellow man? No age in humanity has been as barbarous as our own. Why is this? Perhaps it is because we have forgotten something fundamental not only about ourselves but regarding the purpose of government. The reason God does not simply condemn war is found in Romans 13:1-7. We have here a brief statement by Paul explaining the purpose of the state; what it exists for under the sovereign direction of God.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes. . .” and [Paul goes on] with other such pleasantries!

Beloved, the purpose of the state is, amongst other things, to carry out God's wrath against the wrongdoer, and the wrongdoer also includes any who would invade your land from abroad. Why is this necessary? Why do we have a state? We do so because people are evil. If you do not restrain evil with power, what will happen? They will get you! If you were in Kenya today, in Nairobi, would you hope perhaps that the police force would have enough force to prevent the Islamists from entering the mall and shooting people? Yes, you would; you would be very glad if there was enough force in the state to do that. And would we be happy to see ourselves totally disarmed so that any nation in the world who desires to could simply come and take what they wanted? No, we would not be happy. God's response to a fallen world is to preserve the maximum degree of peace by creating the state to preserve the peace and to favor what is good. What happens, then, when the state begins to favor what is evil?

In the case of Gaza, (v. 6),

“For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds. I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and him who holds the scepter from Ashkelon; I will turn my hand against Ekron and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish,” says the Lord God.”

The condemnation of Gaza is that they removed an entire population from a conquered territory. We are not told what territory was conquered, but we are told that they were delivered to Edom. The same will be said of Tyre in the next judgment. According to research it was the practice at that time to sell conquered people as slaves. The supposition here is that Gaza dominated the entire slave market, which is why it alone of the Philistine city states is named. These nations treated people and nations simply as things, things that could be used and abused in whatever way they wanted.

What about Tyre, v. 9”

“Thus says the Lord, ‘For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they delivered up a whole people to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood. So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her strongholds.’”

In the case of Tyre we have a critical addition to the element [condemned] in the case of Gaza in verse 9. Tyre's conquest and enslavement of an entire people violated a covenant of brotherhood. It is most likely a reference to a covenant made between David the king of Israel and the king of Tyre. For long years there had been peaceful relationships between Israel and her neighbor north on the coast [of the Mediterranean Sea]. Tyre had supplied not

only the cedars of Lebanon for the great building projects of David and Solomon but also important elements of the skilled labor for the work done. Now suddenly they throw aside that covenant and the long history of mutual respect which it had secured and violated that respect and violated the dignity of man. It would be like this, that suddenly Canada sends a force across the border and scoops up the entire population of Seattle and sells them off as slave labor to Iran. Outrageous! Stabbed in the back! A violation of long held trust. It is of the essence of God's character that He is faithful. He does not betray others; but Tyre did.

We go on to Edom: v. 11,

“Thus says the Lord, ‘For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever. So I will send a fire upon Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.’”

Here again the condemnation is for the violation of certain kinds of relational bonds which rightly serve to restrain the inherent violence of men against men. Edom was joined to the peoples of Israel and Judah by blood ties. Edom was the brother of Jacob. So in v. 11 we are told *“...because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity and his anger tore perpetually and he kept his wrath forever.”* Here is bitterness in the heart, an anger that is fed and fed and fed until finally in anger and bitterness you look upon your foe and you do not see a human being; you only see something to destroy. So bitterness works in the heart an anger, a hatred which finally poisoned the soul of a whole people.

Do we know our history? Do we realize that these things have happened again and again in the history of humanity, that the vicious attacks, the foaming hatred directed by one people against another mark the history of humanity in the West as well as elsewhere? Edom had become wholly absorbed and unrestrained in their hatred, obliterating all sensibility of their common ties and humanity. Do we feel that way about North Korea, Iran, Syria, the Somalis (who I think perpetrated the attack in Kenya)? Do not ever nurse hatred toward another.

As with the first two pairs of nations so there is a common bond between the last pair, Ammon and Moab. Verse 13,

“Thus says the Lord: ‘For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border. So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah, and it shall devour her strongholds, with shouting on the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind; and their king shall go into exile, he and his princes together,’ says the Lord.”

“Thus says the Lord: ‘For three transgressions of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its princes with him,’ says the Lord.”

According to Genesis 19 these two nations or peoples were derived from the daughters of Lot, Abraham's nephew. It was not this bond, however, which unites this pair in their judgment, but the peculiarly vicious character of their violence. Ammon attacked pregnant women and destroyed the unborn children within them in order to ensure there would be no survivors and they could occupy the land they had now conquered. Less obvious to us in its barbarity is what Moab did in desecrating the bones of the dead. That was an act which would have deeply offended the Edomites. It would also have severed them from their own past.

I am going to make a side note. By now you ought to be asking this question: “Didn't God have Israel commit genocide? Is this a case of the pot calling the kettle black?” First, the answer is yes, He did. That is exactly what He told the Israelites to do. Every man, woman and child was to be killed. There is no point in pretending things aren't the way they were. The next thing is to realize if you go back to Genesis 15 that

God made a covenant with Order of Worship for September 22, title, “The Moral Passions of God”,
text, Amos 1:3-2:3
Opening Song:

Welcome and Invocation: Matthew 5:13-20
Ministry Moment:

Message Theme: All men and nations have exposure to the moral nature (passions) of God and are answerable for their violation of His principles of right and good.

Worship Theme: We are to praise God and be thankful for His holiness in goodness and justice which operate in the restraint of evil in the world

Sunday Evening in the Word
Effective and Fruitful Faith: 2 Peter 1:1-15
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm in the Church Library

“The Prayer Closet”
September 22, 2013
“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying that:

1. **Steve and Carol Lyons in Tanzania:** the Spirit will comfort them in the recent death of Steve’s father; the Lord will raise up the necessary workers for training the teachers and the local pastors; the Lord will continue to provide open doors for new teacher placement and witness; the Lord ensure continued favor from the state and local officials
2. **President Obama:** the Lord will work a heart of humility and a great hunger for truth and righteousness in him; the Spirit will shed the light of God’s truth into his heart and mind; the Father will preserve him and his family from all evil
3. **The ministries and Boards of the Church:** the Lord will guide each as they pray regarding the challenge of serving the Lord in the up-coming year and develop budgets to bring plans into the reality of serving others and glorifying God with an effective witness of His grace and truth
4. **Military and Civil Service Personnel of the Week:**
5. **Young Adult of the Week:**

Abraham. It was an unconditional covenant. At that time God did a number of things: He affirmed the promise that Abraham would have a son; He accepted Abraham’s faith in Him and His promises as true righteousness; He confirmed that Abraham would in fact inherit this land which God had said would be his after Abraham let Lot [Abraham’s nephew] take the first choice of the best land for his own flocks. Finally He told Abraham one more thing. “You can’t have the land for over 400 years.” Why? Why would Abraham have to wait for four hundred years before he could inherit the land? There was a very specific reason: He could not have the land [until after that time] because that was how long it would take the Amorites to fill up or complete their iniquity. With all of this it is clear that the Word of God wants you and me to understand that what Israel did was in the character of a divine act of judgment against an obdurately wicked people who refused to accept God’s word to them. They would not repent and change. That is the point of “for three transgressions and for four.” There is a point in time when God says “Enough! You have chosen and I will honor your choice and treat you according to your choice.” That is what the Amorites have done.

It is highly instructive in terms of our understanding God and His treating of humanity to see what is the first thing that happens when God arrives [with Israel] in the land with His people. Do you notice what happens? The spies go into the city of Jericho, Rahab takes them in, and there are a number of things in the conversation with Rahab that are highly enlightening. As she talks with the spies and places her whole trust in them and their God, she lets us know that the people of Jericho and of all the land know that God is the God of ultimately irresistible power. “We know what God did in getting you [through] the Red Sea. We know what God did in getting you out of Egypt. We know what God did when you came up and attacked the kings across the river. We know that God will win.” Secondly, they knew that He was a God of forgiveness. So what would you do in the face of an irresistibly powerful God who gives you the chance to be forgiven? You would like to say that you would be smart enough to say, “Please forgive me.” But the Bible tells us we never are except by the grace of God. He saved Rahab: the rest would not sue for peace.

The gross cruelty of treating people as things, wantonly destroying with great cruelty, selling [whole peoples] off as slaves, breaking covenants of brotherhood and giving way to seething, persistent and extreme hatred, are all atrocities against the weak and the defenseless. These indicate at least some of the moral passions of God. The judgment of God regardless of the religious beliefs or the philosophical perspectives or the political order of those who commit them, God judges the wickedness of men. Such sins by the nations of the world have continued to this day. Who of us has not recoiled as we began to learn about what the Nazis did when they had power? Who of us has not recoiled as we learned about the Gulag in Russia and the millions upon million that Russia and China have slaughtered in their attempt to create utopias on the face of the earth? Who of us does not look with horror at the filming of Imperial Japan’s [armies] invading China and burying alive the Chinese? Who of us would not join John Newton in horror of the slave trade of Africa when they packed the bodies in the ships and most of them died? And what about the horrific realities of aborted babies and sex trafficking and the production and distribution of pornography? What happens when a state begins to favor what is evil? Beloved, Amos does not allow us to think that we can continue in these sins with no day of reckoning. God judges the wickedness of men.

We need to take special note of the repeated introduction phrase “for three transgressions and for four”; it is not a “three strikes and you are out” sort of thing. Rather we are being told that there is a point at which God’s judgment replaces mercy in dealing with us. In some ways chapter 5:14-15 are thematic for the whole book of Amos. Please turn there. This is the counsel that we receive from Amos in the midst of these horrific statements of judgment:

“Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, ad love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.”

I want you to take special note of the last statement. The depth of Israel’s trouble – that is “Joseph” – the true nature of her defection from God and His ways is that he says this, “It may be...” It may be...” not, “It will be.” I may continue to be gracious, but I may not. You cannot read Amos and ignore the distinct possibility and ultimately there is the certainty that God will act in judgment because He will not endlessly tolerate the wickedness of men, whether it be that of the nations or of us as individuals. In the days of Jesus there were certain ones who said, “We are so eager for the day of the Lord’s return and the day of judgment to come!” Don’t pray that way. You pray for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a convicting of the hearts of God’s own people of their wickedness, and ask that He would give us the strength to be a repentant and reformed people in the midst of a wicked nations and that His acts of judgment would be withheld as long as possible.

Let us pray: Gracious Father in heaven, I confess before You these are harsh word to hear, but they are certainly no more harsh than the realities to which they are addressed. We, our Father, cannot hide ourselves, we should not hide ourselves from the reality of the wickedness of man, whether our own, our neighbors’, or the wickedness of the nations of the world, and to recognize that it is with great forbearance that You allow us to continue, for Father the promises is given that You desire no man to come to death but that all would be saved. O Father, bring us to our knees, indeed on our faces before you, asking for mercy yet again for another day. For Father it is in Jesus’ name that we pray. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Do you believe that nations will be judged by God in distinction from His judgment on individuals? In your estimation what have been the most and the least “moral” nations in history and what is your reason for saying so?
2. What do you see as universal moral principles which apply to all people at all times in all places?
3. What can people know about God without the help of revelation? (Added question: do you see proper worship of God as a moral imperative?)
4. If all people are made in the image of God:
 - a. In what ways does that image appear in people?
 - b. How should people be treated?
 - c. What drives people to not treat others that way?
5. Why is treating people cruelly an offense against their dignity as made in God’s image?
6. Why is slavery an offense against the inherent dignity of a person?
7. What most effectively restrains the impulse to violence or to using people without respect of their dignity in our day? How effective are those restraints?
8. Shouldn’t Israel (and perhaps God) be condemned for what she did to the Canaanites?
9. Do you think the sins of America are less, equal to, or greater than the sins of ancient Israel’s neighbors? What are the sins of our nation which stand out to you?
10. At what point do you think God will act to judge our nation?