

Sermon – 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Read Text: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 in Liturgy, then again during the sermon

Sermon:

I'm sure you all recall that God brought his people up out of Egypt at the direction of Moses and led them into the Promised Land, where they lived for generations. As time went by, the first generation to cross the Jordan would share the story with their descendants. And this continued, passing from one generation to the next. But what did they say as they shared the story?

Their forefathers who left Egypt with Moses endured many difficulties and were lost for many years. They trusted Moses when he told them he'd lead them into a better land, but he just kept leading them in circles! At least, that's what they thought, crying out against Moses and against God, "We would have been better off in Egypt!"

Every time they did this, they broke their covenant with God, and he wanted to wipe them from the earth. But Moses cried out to God, asking him to spare his chosen people. And in his great mercy, God did. He allowed his people to live, but because of their disobedience, God determined that all those who spoke out against him or who turned to other gods would die in the desert.

Only two men, Joshua and Caleb, remained faithful to the LORD and were permitted to enter the land of their inheritance with the next generation. God did not wipe out his people, but continued to provide for them, bringing them into the Promised Land. This history shows us an important truth:

God's mercy is great. And with his mercy comes a warning for those who are unrepentant, and a promise to those who do repent of their sins. (Let this sink in for a moment.)

A few hundred years go by, and we're now in the time of Amos the Prophet. From the moment the Israelites entered the Promised Land to the time of Amos, the Israelites experienced times when they followed the LORD's commands and times when they rebelled. When Amos was Prophet, the people were experiencing a time of rebellion.

The faith of the Israelites was at stake. They'd been following the ways of the surrounding nations, even as far as worshiping other gods. Some still made offerings to the LORD, but these were often made in such a way that they were no longer pleasing to God.

Through Amos, the LORD reminded the people what he had done in the past when they sinned against him. He'd caused famines, destroyed vineyards, and even stopped the rain from falling so they had no water for crops or for drinking. He overthrew their leaders and permitted enemy nations to conquer them.

In all this devastation, God still remembered the Israelites as his nation set apart above all nations. And in Amos, chapter 5, God shows his great mercy in calling for the Israelites to repent. We read from our Sermon text in chapter 5:

Sermon Text:

**Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire; it will have no one to quench it. You who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground, you hate the one who reproves in court**

**and despise him who tells the truth. You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of Justice in the courts. Therefore the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil. Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good, maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.**

This is the Word of our LORD.

Let's break this down for a moment. God knew the Israelites had again strayed from the path he had set them on. He rebuked the people, and in the midst of his rebuke, God's mercy shines forth. "Seek the LORD and live!" This phrase, as short as it is, provided all one needed for Salvation. To seek the LORD means that we look to God for the forgiveness of our sins and in thankfulness live in a way that pleases God.

The Israelites, as a nation, weren't doing this anymore. Instead, their deeds and actions were done only to please themselves. In this specific case, the people were abusing the law system, which God had established through Moses and the Judges. Leaders were set before the people to help settle disputes, and it was intended that all parties involved be given an equal opportunity to present their case to the judge.

This judge was then to view the case without bias and in accordance to God's laws so no party could take advantage of another. The situation in Amos 5 shows that this did not happen on a regular basis. The judges began taking monetary bribes to alter their ruling. Rather than looking at the cases equally, they favored the highest bidder, which of course presented an issue for those who had little to no funds or property.

Those who properly rebuked the courts were ignored, and the truth lost its importance. The people had taken God's judicial system and twisted it into a sinful system to better suit their own desires rather than the righteous cause God had instituted. In doing so, they sinned against the LORD, and because they did not repent, God gave them this warning:

He promised to sweep through the Israelites like a fire that could not be satisfied. He would destroy the unrighteous and take all that they had. When God brought the people into the land of Canaan, they reaped the benefits for work they had not done: living in houses they did not build and eating from vineyards they did not plant. Now God turned the tables on them; their enemies would reap the benefits of their work!

But immediately following this warning, he again issues a promise to the righteous. "Seek the LORD and live! Seek good, not evil, then the LORD God Almighty will be with you." With all the destruction that comes with disobeying God's Word, he still extended his mercy so the Israelites would benefit from the LORD's works of Salvation. This means that those who repent would go to heaven because of what God has done.

You may be thinking, well, it's great that God gave them another chance. But what does this have to do with me? The same love God showed to the Israelites, even when they didn't return it, he continues to show to all people. God wants every person to be saved, and because we live when we do, we know how God saved all people by sacrificing his Son.

The Israelites had a promise of what was to come. We have MORE! We know that God worked through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, who bore the sins of the world. With his death on the cross and his resurrection that followed, Christ conquered sin and death. And in doing so, Christ redeemed every sinner. He redeemed the repentant and the unrepentant.

So if Christ saved every person, why don't all people go to heaven? Just like the Israelites sometimes followed God and sometimes did not, we do the same. In Amos 5, the people altered the system God set up to fit their own desires. They claimed to follow God's Word when really, they followed their own ideas instead.

This still happens. People take Scripture and pull it apart, pick through it, and piece it back together in a way that allows them to get away with almost anything. We want what we want, and there's only one way to get it, right? Wrong! God does not want us to look at his Word, break it down, and say, "Hmm, yes. I like this," and, "Uh, no! That makes me feel horrible. That can't possibly be right!" If we do this to the Word of God, then it ceases to be the Word of God. Instead, it becomes the word of man, of sinners.

If we listen to this new message, then we are no better than the Israelites who bribed the judges at the time of Amos. We twist the Word of God to create new rules, rules that fit what we want for ourselves. "You can't judge me. The Bible says so." "I'm pretty sure I'll be alright. At least I didn't murder anybody." These statements focus on comparing ourselves to others, as though some people are more sinful than others. Sometimes we even wonder what God can do for us. "If you would help me, even a little, I'd go to church more often."

And God did! And God does help you. All who repent receive the forgiveness Christ won for us, but many people sin without repentance. Some do this simply by refusing to believe God exists. Others by following false gods or higher beings, and still others by altering God's Word so much that it is no longer God's Word. Christ died for us so we could have the forgiveness of these sins, and of all sins, but when someone is unrepentant in their sin, they refuse this amazing forgiveness. This is the warning that comes with God's mercy, that unrepentant sinners will go to hell.

Believers who repent and follow God's true Word receive this forgiveness. This is the promise that comes from God's mercy, that repentant sinners will go to heaven. But how do you know if what you believe is actually God's Word and that you live according to his will? What about all the unbelievers who think they believe in God, but do not? How do we know the difference? God gives us a promise. He that believes and is baptized will be saved. Take God at his Word.

And what about your life? The only way to know if your life aligns with God's Word is to *compare* it to God's Word. Don't look for answers in the world around you, following the ways of men because they sound appealing. This is what led the Israelites away time and again. Lean on the supports God has given to us.

God has given us his Word in Scripture. He's given us the church so we can study Scripture with like-minded believers, and he provides Christian relationships to help us grow in his Word and in faith. These relationships are all around us with family, friends, and spouses. By relying on Scripture and growing in our Christian relationships, we can know with confidence that we live according to God's true Word.

But we still must keep watch for the sin in our lives. Even when we think we are following God's will, we can be lead astray. The rich young man came to Jesus thinking that he was living perfectly according to God's law. What he failed to see was that he did not hold God above all else, in his case above his wealth. He thought he was living according to God's will, but this one thing proved he was not.

We can guard against such thoughts all we want, but unless we stay grounded in Scripture, we could end up just like the Israelites who stood before Amos. Listen to the words of Amos and follow them: "Hate evil. Love good." Remember God's great mercy. Find comfort in the promise of Salvation. Amen

May God keep you in this true faith and understanding all the days of your lives. Amen