

## “Grieved or not grieved?”

September 30, 2007

Text: *Psalm 146:1-2, 5-10; Amos 6:1-7,*

### I.

As we look around us—around our community, our state, our nation, our world, and as these *stinging* words from AMOS sound out to us, awakening our spirit ...

- *Are there not things over which we ought to be grieved?*
- Are there not events—happenings—in this world that ought to upset us, that ought to trouble us and arouse our deep concern and passion?
- Are there not things about which we ought to be outraged and appalled?

Our reading from Amos comes after us right from the start:

*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion.* With these opening words, we know, right away, we’re in for some prickly moments ... for a rough-edged day.

I remember listening to a rousing lecture years ago by Old Testament theologian and biblical scholar, **Walter Brueggemann**. He was talking about *prophetic critique* and the role of the prophet. Referring to this reading from Amos, he said: *Woe means, you’re going to die!*

No doubt, he was overstating the point for effect. But for sure it means *we better pay attention.*

*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion.* (Zion refers to Israel)  
*To those who lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall;  
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp ... who drink wine from bowls,  
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,  
But are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!* (Joseph refers to Israel)

### II.

For those who are new to the Bible, a word about the biblical **prophets** and their historic role as **social critic** (As a side note, in my Bible, the Old Testament—the Hebrew Scriptures—are over eleven hundred pages long. Almost one-third of this is the prophetic writings of the prophets).

The prophets filled a critical role within the religion of Israel, particularly as it stood against the corruptive abuses of power at the hands of the monarchy. The prophet was the **social critic**, the messenger of God in the face of oppression or injustice. His is the voice that rises up from within or from underneath, giving voice to *the least of these*.

It's a voice—again, speaking for God—that speaks truth to power, a voice that sees the BIG PICTURE of inter-relationships and of justice and dignity for all people.

The speech of the prophet is speech that reminds people in high places of the most basic and foundational biblical truths. It is speech that evokes memory of primary commitments, of covenants and of the need for a humble and grateful spirit. It is speech that evokes memory of what God asks of us that we might live.

It is a voice, like that of **Second Isaiah** in Isaiah 55 ... (check it out):

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts ...  
Nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord ...*

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth ...  
So are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

### III.

And so, the prophet of the LORD comes forth and has a word for God's people; and the word is **WOE**.

Amos' prophetic activity was during the historical period known as the **Silver Age** (around 746 BCE, Before the Common Era), comparable only to the **Golden Age** of King David and King Solomon. Within Israel, it was a time of great economic prosperity and material wealth.

It was a time also when the affluence of the *elites* brought with it life-styles of luxury and extravagance, resulting in abuse and exploitation of the poor and lower classes.

And so, Amos' word of **WOE** sounds out:

- Are you not grieved over all the decadence and abuse about you?
- Are you not grieved over the poverty, the hurt, the pain, the deep sorrow and sadness of those mired in poverty ... of the victims ... of those who deal with hardship and misery every day?

The problem with those who are *at ease in Zion*, who are too smug and arrogant in the illusion of their own invincibility, is that they've lost their capacity for *empathy* and

*compassion.* And when we human beings lose that, something inside us dies, and it's a sad day for the purposes of God.

#### IV.

Again, back to us. Are there not things about which we ought to be *grieved*?

- From what the polls suggest, we Americans are grieved, mostly, over the war in Iraq, as well we should be.
- From everything I read and hear, the Iraq War will be the number *one* issue in the 2008 election.

Why? Because 70% of us Americans no longer support the war. We support the troops, but not the war. With virtually no end in sight, we view it as a sinking ship ... a lost cause ... a tragic consequence of hubris and pride run mad. And we're tired of the endless *spin* to somehow justify the war to begin with.

And what's more, it's bankrupting our nation, and delaying the inevitable sorting out that the *Sunnis* and *Shiites* and *Kurds* are going to have to do on their own; or at least, certainly, without us around to blame and kill and otherwise disrupt any ultimate peace process.

With world opinion overwhelmingly against our continued presence in Iraq ... and with 70% of Americans opposed to the war and wanting us to bring our troops home, *is it not possible* that we are on the wrong track?

*Is it not possible* that our decision for war was a *bad* decision? And that the distortions and half-truths that led us to invade Iraq to begin with have now come around to haunt us?

1. *In fact*, we did not have solid grounds for an invasion.
2. *In fact*, we did not have an informed and enlightened understanding of Iraqi culture, religion and politics.
3. *In fact*, we did not have any adequate end-game plan in place.
4. *In fact*, we acted unilaterally, independently of most of our allies, and in defiance of widespread voices of caution within the United Nations.

*Is it not possible* that, along the way, we were a bit too full of ourselves and lost sight of the BIG PICTURE of things? *Is it not possible* that the prophet **Amos**, as God's messenger, is speaking to us?

*Woe to you who are at ease in America and are not grieved over your misguided ways.*

Could the word from God's prophet, in fact, be a word for us, a word that we need to hear?

## V.

At some point, friends, we have to ask ourselves, *How did we get here?* In Amos' time, Israel got there by the sheer explosion of events eventually overtaking her malaise and complacency.

And nobody noticed.

In America, we're noticing. And prophetic voices within America and elsewhere have noticed. And *is it not possible* that God, too, has noticed?

And if God's word of *woe* is indeed for us, *is it not possible*—GET THIS—that we're not invincible? And yet, to many across our vast and abundant land, we are invincible. To many, we are *the new Israel*, God's last, best hope for planet earth. And perhaps we are, but ...

Israel, too, at the time of Amos, pulsed with invincibility. She couldn't imagine her *Silver Age* coming to an end, at least not in the life time of those *as ease in Zion*.

And so, the prophet had a word for Israel's invincibility. Check it out!

Go over to Calneh, and see; and from there, go to Hamath (both cities in Syria) and then to Gath of the Philistines. Are you better than these kingdoms? Is your land somehow more hallowed than their land? Are you, somehow, more valued in God's sight than they?

Calneh, and Hamath and Gath were all cities that had been destroyed because of their arrogance, because of their greedy and sinful ways. They were commercial centers in neighboring nations, representing wealth and security. Yet, they fell, each of them, and lost everything.

Did Israel somehow think that she was better than these communities? And that their fate could not come to her?

Friends, *is it not possible* that America can fail and fall from grace and be in need of God's forgiveness as much as other nations. Are we so certain of our virtue, of our rightness in all things?

As a nation who has been so abundantly blessed through the years, have we come to feel that we have some *birthright* of virtue and preeminence that will extend indefinitely? In recent years, we hear all the time about *America as Empire*. What a frightening notion.

Empires, traditionally, rule unilaterally, from positions of power and domination. Empires are not popular in the wider world; they don't operate relationally. Their goal—always—is to preserve the status quo and to maintain control.

Christianity was born in the midst of the Roman Empire. It was Roman Empire, along with Jewish legalism that put Jesus to death on an awful cross. In early Christian circles, *empire* was always the enemy, the antichrist, the monstrous force of evil in the world.

## VI.

Are we not grieved over the prospect of *America as Empire*? I think we are.

- Empire is too arrogant and too full of itself.
- Empire doesn't listen, because it thinks it doesn't have to.
- Empire has no empathy or compassion.
- It doesn't care about the lingering inequities that plague God's people.
- Empire cares only about security and control ... and one more day of yesterday.

This isn't the future we want for our country. We're better than that; more honorable and noble than that. Our religious and national traditions, our spirit and our character, point us to higher ground than that.

Our values as a people cannot be held back and diminished by the dark moods of *empire*. Why? Because ***we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all persons are created equal.*** Translation: every human person has value in God's sight.

Why? Because the hope and promise that burst forth from our cherished freedoms lift us always to higher ground. The best of America is *not* empire. The best of America is a gracious democracy, rooted in a strong and vital character, and fueled by a passion to lift up the common good. These are the values that have made us a great people.

## VII.

Many of the biblical prophets talk about a new day, a new *peaceful kingdom* where peace will reign forever and ever. Always, that's the vision, that's the hope. **Isaiah** calls that day and that place ***God's holy mountain.***

*O what a day, says the prophet, when the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid ...and they will not hurt or destroy on **all my holy mountain;** for the earth will be full of **the knowledge of the Lord.***

O what a day! On that day, all of God's people—from all the nations of the earth ... all the religions on the planet—will find their way to God's holy mountain; and the Spirit of

God will touch their hearts, and they will be rich in good works and generous and eager to share in all things.

Again, O what a day—beyond our grief . . . beyond our humble and sincere mourning and sadness for the place our recent actions as a nation have taken us.

But it may first take our grief to get us there .

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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