

Amos the Prophet

Amos 5:18-24

One of the big news stories in Iowa over the past few weeks has been the collapse of an apartment building in Davenport. Despite complaints from tenants for years, the property still passed inspections. Yet now three people are dead, other residents and businesses are displaced, and the owner is in legal trouble.

That's probably the closest we generally have to an earthquake here in Iowa. Now, here in Iowa, earthquakes are a relatively rare occurrence. Any shaking of the ground is more likely to be from a freight train rumbling by or the construction on buildings around town. But if there was an earthquake, it would be a big one.

The prophet Amos is familiar with earthquakes. In fact, his book begins with an earthquake (1:1) and ends with one (9:1). At the end of Amos 1:1, the prophet announces that his ministry ceased "two years before the earthquake." This particular earthquake must have been stronger than normal, as is indicated by the use of the definite article *the*. The definite article implies that this tectonic shift stood out to the degree that one could simply refer to it as *the* earthquake, and everyone knew which one that was. Most scholars connect the earthquake to the one attested to in the ancient city of Hazor and dated to around 760 BC. But it isn't just the physical earthquake Amos talks about. It is how the world is going to be shaken.

In Amos 1:2 the prophet describes the impact of divine shaking. "He said: The Lord roars from Zion. From Jerusalem he sends out his voice. The pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Mount Carmel withers." Zion/Jerusalem is in the southern kingdom, and is the sight of the temple, where God promises to be. Mount

Carmel is in the northern kingdom of Israel, and had been the site of Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal. The entire Promised Land wilts and withers when the Lord roars and unleashes His shaking judgment against His people.

Amos is a prophet during the time of the divided kingdom. Even though he's from the southern kingdom of Judah, he is called by God to the northern kingdom of Israel. He's a reluctant prophet, called from being a shepherd and a tender of fig trees to go be God's voice.

Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah (the court prophet), "I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:14-15).

Amos didn't become a prophet for fame and popularity. He went because God called him. And he goes to shake things up.

From all appearances, Israel is doing fine. But Amos knows not all is right. Idolatry runs rampant, and those on top are oppressing those beneath them. And so Amos warns that God is going to shake things up. The complacent classes are going to find more trouble than they expected.

"Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I

know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate.” (Amos 5:11-12)

Amos uses the idea of judgment day as a way to illustrate this. Some were thinking that the Day of Judgment would be good for them, but they're mistaken. “It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” (Amos 5:18-19). What a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

The prophet Amos reminds us that those who await the day of the Lord don't always know what they are asking for, that they may find themselves on the wrong end when God comes to clean up the mess the world is in. Amos warns them that, though they may want God to let justice roll, they don't realize that God's justice is going to roll right over them. They will build houses, but others will live in them. They'll plant vineyards, but others will harvest from them. What they think belongs to them will be taken and given to someone else.

Seismic shaking is a major theme in many of Amos' oracles. In Amos 9:1 Amos records, “I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and he said: Strike the capitals on top of the pillars so that the thresholds shake. Cut them off so that they fall on the heads of all the people, and those who survive I will kill with the sword. No one who flees from there will get away, and not a single fugitive from among them will escape.” God's command makes the thresholds of the temple shake. The earthquake and ensuing rubble is God's judgment upon His people for

their unbelief, which turned divine promises into slogans that no longer impacted their lives.

Twenty years ago, the summer after I graduated from college, I went on a choir and service trip to Naples and Rome. As part of that, we climbed up Mount Vesuvius, the volcano whose eruption destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum. That area is still one of the most earthquake prone places on the planet, with concerns a neighboring volcano will soon erupt for the first time in almost 500 years. Despite its natural beauty, nowhere else on earth is as unstable, except for perhaps our lives.

Tremors rumble when we say, “Just one more drink. Just one more lie. Just one more fling. Just one more glance.” But one more always leads to one more, and then just one more. And then a massive earthquake hits, and in its aftershocks we find ourselves trapped in a basement of bondage and brokenness. Sure, being obsessed with pornography, money, gossip, food, people's approval, or work is a strange place to be in, at first. It's crushing to be trapped beneath tons of collapsed hopes and shattered dreams. But in time we become accustomed to living in destruction and death.

God invites us to confess our sins that keep us stuck on stuff that kills and steals and destroys. He invites us to admit that we all too often are living in a mess largely of our own making. Our God wants us to confess our willful disobedience that continues to trap and torment us with guilt and shame all the days of our lives.

Despite all of the judgment found in the book of Amos, despite all of the doom and gloom, God promises in Amos 9:11 to repair and rebuild our lives. Hear the Gospel of the Lord: “In that day I will raise up the fallen shelter of David. I will repair the broken parts of its walls,

and I will raise up its ruins. I will rebuild it as in days of old.”

These sure and certain promises to the house of David are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Our Savior reaches into our wreckage to pull us free, and He does it with hands laced with blood.

Finally, you see, blood was all Jesus had.

His disciples had deserted Him.

His garments had been gambled away.

Even His Father had turned His back.

Hands were cut, his side was pierced, blood was shed, and we are saved.

Through the Shed Blood of Jesus Offered in the Holy Supper

Blood was all He had, but the blood of Jesus is all we need.

“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!”

At the Holy Supper Jesus reaches into your rubble here and now. His blood rescues, redeems, restores, and repairs everything that has been so broken.

Our worlds will be shaken. Sometimes those shakes will come from things outside of our control. Sometimes they will come when our sins catch up with us. Whenever it happens, God promises to bring us back to himself, repair and restore us. What a wonderful promise.

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