



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY (Beloved Community Day)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 20, 2008

Herbert Marbury, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN

Lection – Amos 5:18-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 18) Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; (v. 19) as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. (v. 20) Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (v. 21) I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. (v. 22) Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. (v. 23) Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. (v. 24) But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the most influential leaders in recent world history. Still, the idea of a United States' holiday recognizing his life and legacy sparked considerable controversy. In 1986, through the heroic efforts of his wife Coretta Scott King and other Civil Rights activists, former President Ronald Reagan declared the third Monday in January "Martin Luther King, Jr. Day," the only federal holiday commemorating an African American.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is an important occasion for United States citizens and, indeed, citizens of the world who are concerned with justice and peace. The Civil Rights Movement not only attempts to correct the injustices suffered by African Americans but also seeks to liberate other oppressed people around the world. At the center of Dr. King's ministry was the hope for the "Beloved Community"—a harmonious global society founded upon God's love for people and people's love for one another, where the scourges of racial hatred and poverty would no

longer exist. Although this hope has not yet been realized, the King Holiday allows congregations to honor the creative ways that God works through willing people who share Dr. King's ideals for the "Beloved Community."

For any momentous period of change there are many participants, but history typically only remembers the names of certain key leaders. Even in this struggle for civil rights, there were numerous willing "foot soldiers" for freedom who came before Dr. King, there were those who walked alongside him, giving their witness and energy to the Civil Rights Movement, and there are those continuing this work today. Many of these "foot soldiers" were, and are, even younger than Dr. King, who was only 26 when destiny propelled him to the forefront of the struggle. For all of Dr. King's importance, we must remember that he did not invent the movement. He inherited it, as do today's foot soldiers.

On a Sunday near January 15, (Dr. King's actual birthday) and for some on the date of his birth, the courageous sacrifice of this civil rights activist is acknowledged through sermons, songs, and prayers emphasizing justice and peace. On the federal holiday itself, African Americans often organize parades and marches, sponsor seminars on non-violence, and hold ecumenical worship services.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Amos 5:18-24

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

At the close of his sermon, my grandfather would rear back, looking beyond the ceiling as if gazing into the courts' of the Most High, and raise in high rhetorical style the question, "Is there a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole?" Similarly, my father would inquire, "Does Jesus care?" Such questions were central to the theologies of their post-Civil Rights Movement sermons. My grandfather and father were part of a generation of black men and women who believed that they were called weekly "to make a wounded people whole."

As the heir of four generations of Methodist preachers who saw the cause of Christ as essentially bound to the cause of racial justice, I came of age hearing stories of my grandfather's fiery defiance of Jim Crow from the pulpit, as well as his memories of "marching with Dr. King." As did many black preachers of their generation, both my grandfather and father considered King a contemporary example of the Christian conscience. My mother, a long-time Methodist missionary, filled my childhood with memories of her participation in the sit-ins in Greensboro, NC. She would often recall instances in which courageous ministers led congregations from worship, to march on the "frontlines," and then back to the church altar for prayer.

For these Christian laborers, Dr. King was a modern-day prophet who had joined Amos's divine call for justice, to "roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Today, the question of justice resonates with even sharper relevance, as successive African American communities have had to deal with the burdens brought about by encounters with crack cocaine in the 1980's, HIV/AIDS in the 1990's, and now the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, a crumbling public education system and an unsteady economy.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The prophecy of Amos occurs during the reign of King Uzziah of Judah (792-755 BCE) and King Jeroboam II of Israel (793-755 BCE). The first five chapters of the book take the reader to the peak of this prophet's anguish and admonitions. More specifically, in 5:18-24, Amos calls upon the heavens to release an all-consuming justice and a totalizing, corrective righteousness.

Amos's name is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning "to lift a burden" (*amas*). His name provides an interpretive key with which to open the prophet's social world, evoking important questions for preaching and teaching moments. For example, what *burdens* in Amos's social world provoked this young shepherd to abandon the only livelihood he knew, leave his home and family, and march defiantly to the nation's capital in order to speak truth to power? What burdens could have been so weighty, so pressing, as to compel this radical act? The prophet's name beckons preachers to revisit the "burdens" in the mid-twentieth century that motivated Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to radical social justice activism. Moreover, what contemporary "burdens" might spur people of conscience and faith to do the same in today's world?

An examination of Amos's social context reveals features of the prophet's critique of poverty, marginalization, greed, militarism, and the privilege of one group of people at the expense of another. Through a focused reading, preachers may quickly detect "sites" where the ancient and contemporary worlds meet. These "sites" invite preachers, in the spirit of Dr. King's proclamation, to offer relevant social critique of the contemporary oppression facing African Americans (for example, racial discrimination in employment, sexism in African American churches and denominations, and poverty in African American communities).

Further examination of Amos's social context unearths other important details. The immense, agriculturally fertile, and militarily superior state of Israel dominated the stunted, rocky, and barren territory of Judah. Judah was in political bondage to Israel, its political superior. Although ancient Israel enjoyed extraordinary political power and economic prosperity, neither the power nor the economic resources were distributed equitably among the populations of the small nation. On the contrary, wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few, ruling elites who controlled the government. Amos witnessed wealth flowing from the working, peasant class to support the luxurious lifestyle of a few politically powerful elites. The rich became richer, and the poor became poorer. During the reign of Jeroboam II, an increasing number of people lost their jobs. These people were squeezed out of the peasant class into a permanent underclass of "expendables," who found themselves in debt slavery and who had no claim to their own lives. In this social context, only two to three percent of the population could afford the luxury of literacy, and higher education was the property of the privileged. Furthermore, vast amounts of the nation's resources that could have been allocated toward humanitarian concerns, such as education and healthcare, were siphoned away to wage King Jeroboam's ill-conceived war against Damascus—a war where Amos would see entire communities doomed to wholesale destruction. These were Amos's "burdens."

With an overview of the social and historical backdrop provided, as we begin to analyze this often-quoted passage from the book of Amos, note that verses 18-20 open with a telling reversal:

the word “alas” is placed in relationship to the phrase “the day of the Lord.” The word “alas” connotes sadness and remorse, while the latter phrase “the day of the Lord” typically is a positive reference. In this instance, however, “alas” redefines “the day of the Lord” as a sad, tragic phenomenon.

Fearing that his audience would miss the subtleties of his rhetoric, Amos clarifies the reference, employing explicit language and graphic images. First, in another rhetorical reversal, he casts the “day of the Lord” unexpectedly as “darkness,” rather than the expected “light” (v. 18). Second, the phrase “fled from a lion, and was met by a bear” signifies that there is no real escape from the judgment of Yahweh (v. 19). In the final image one goes “into the house,” seeking refuge after escaping the lion and the bear, only to be “bitten by a snake.” This image symbolizes that escape from the “bite” of Yahweh’s justice is a vain delusion (v. 19). Amos concludes this section in (v. 20) by repeating the opening image. This time, however, he poses it as a question: “Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” Surely by now, his audience will respond correctly to this question.

In (vv. 21-23), Amos unleashes a sharp critique of three Temple rituals: festivals, sacrificial offerings, and worship. The message is clear. The ritual practices of the Temple are of little value without the practice of social justice! Amos uses stirring verbs to characterize Yahweh’s wholesale rejection of the practices of the priesthood and congregation. Without justice, Yahweh will only “hate and despise” their religious celebrations (v. 21). Yahweh “will not accept” their burnt offerings (v. 22). And Yahweh “will not listen” to their songs of worship (v. 23).

Amos’s criticism of Temple religion bears a striking resemblance to Dr. King’s critique of liberal white Christians and of certain black and white evangelical Christians. Dr. King believed that worship inside the sanctuary should also motivate religious people to transform the society outside the sanctuary. Thus, any congregation failing to make the connection between the practices of the Christian faith and engaged advocacy for social justice would face indictment from the prophet Amos and the prophet Martin.

Finally, like many an effective African American preacher, Amos concludes his message with a rhetorical flurry, invoking cosmic images. Out of the hopelessness and despair of the eighth century, he imagines a vision where “justice” (*mishphat*) would roll down like waters. There were other, more common Hebrew words for “waters” that Amos could have used, but he did not. For instance, he could have used the word “river” (*nahar*), which would have drawn upon the historical significance of Joshua leading the tribes across the Jordan River. He could also have used the word “sea” (*yam*), which would have conjured the image of Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea. But the words “river” and “sea” were too routine and lacked the poetic power necessary to describe the flood of justice that Amos wanted to wash over his world.

Thus, to describe the character of this justice, Amos reached all the way back to the Genesis story of creation, using the word “waters” (*mayim*) in Genesis 1. To represent an overwhelming and unimaginable justice, Amos chooses an equally unimaginable image. He calls for justice, which surges like the primordial waters of creation in Genesis 1—the waters that supported the very foundations of the earth; the waters that were present even before God began to create; the waters that were so powerful that God would use the firmament of the sky to hold them back.

Challenge

It is justice rolling down like the uncontrollable waters of creation that captivates Amos's imagination—justice flowing and overflowing. While oppressive forces and philosophies have attempted to restrict the waters that Amos saw, these waters continue to break loose. Indeed, these waters rumbled southward and in 1955 swept up a young minister named Martin in Montgomery. Like our ancestors, we must muster the courage to get into the flow of these surging waters, allowing them to take us where they will.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The roar of the lion, the growl of the bear, and the hiss of the snake (v. 19); the sounds of religious festivals and assemblies (v. 21); the crackling of the fire as it consumes the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and offerings of well-being (v. 22); the songs played on the harps (v. 23); the mighty roar of the waters and of the ever-flowing streams of justice (v. 24);

Sights: Darkness and light (vv. 18, 20); the lion, the bear, and the snake (v. 19); the house (v. 19); the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and offerings of well-being (v. 22); crowds of people gathering for religious festivals and assemblies (v. 21); the harps (v. 23); the bottomless depths of the waters and of the ever-flowing streams of justice (v. 24);

Smells: The scent of the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and offerings of well-being (v. 22); and

Textures: The texture of the wall in the house (v. 19); the sensation of the snakebite (v. 19); the textures of the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and offerings of well-being (v. 22);

Additional Recommendations:

For additional information and resources for the sermonic moment, and for other teaching purposes, see the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday (Beloved Community Day) Cultural Resource unit of this lectionary.

Notes

For more information, consult the King Center online location:
www.thekingcenter.org/tkc/index.asp accessed 23 October 2007