

Matthew 25: 1-13 Flasks of Oil.

Three more Sundays including today, and Advent will be upon us, ushering in the new liturgical year. Every year, as we neared the end of the academic year, the principal of the school where I worked as the chaplain used to remind students to “Finish Strong” and not to switch gears prematurely to the vacation mode. Resisting the distractions of commercials and hectic planning for the holiday season, let us, too, remain present to what the Spirit has to say to us in these final weeks of the liturgical year, because the prophets of old and the Gospel writer Matthew are taking us to the finish line.

Amos is the first prophet whose words were compiled as a book in the Hebrew Bible; the oldest among the prophetic books. Contrary to the popular misconception that the God of the Old Testament is the angry God, who is all about judgment, and the God of the New Testament is all about love and forgiveness, the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures typically hold in tension the words of judgment and the words of comfort.

That beloved expression of Psalm 103 verse 8, “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love“ echoes throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. But Amos is very heavy on judgment throughout, as you heard in today’s passage John read to us.

As uncomfortable as his words might make us, or perhaps especially because they make us uncomfortable, frightened even, we need to listen deeply to these words of judgment, God’s judgment, till we can hear them as God’s words offering us hope. Let’s

Amos warns God’s people that if they expected the day of the Lord, the day that their God would come through for them, to be bright with light, they are in for a surprise, for it would be nothing but. Then Amos speaks on behalf of God. And God sounds pretty frustrated with God’s people. “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.....”

But why? Why this rejection of their worship? Because, God says through Amos, more than the ritualistically correct worship and even their hymns of praise, God wants them to “let the justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a flowing stream.” **Let** the justice roll down like waters and **let** righteousness flow like a stream. **LET** them.... The word “Let” them, tells us they are there, God’s justice and righteousness, but somehow, they are dammed up, blocked; the people are not **LETTING** them flow down. And it’s making God mad as hell.

Justice and righteousness are like waters and a flowing stream that bring back life to the dry arid land. Does that imagery speak to you? When you imagine it, how does that feel? We know what it is to long for moisture, don't we? God wants even more for us; God intends for us a flowing stream. But apparently, that was not happening, whatever was going on with God's people in Amos' time, they were not letting that happen. So, God was angry, frustrated, and I bet quite disappointed. I wonder how we make God feel today.

God's judgment looks and sounds like angry rejection, but what God angrily rejects is that which opposes what God cares most about: justice and righteousness -- for God's people, especially the oppressed people. In fact, Psalm 103:8 that says, "the LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," follows verse 6 and 7 which says, "The Lord works righteousness; does justice for all who are oppressed; the Lord made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel."

God's judgment, God's anger and frustration and condemnation, is the reflection of how deeply God cares about justice for the oppressed and righteousness, which is about how we treat one another. When the people of God do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with their God, only then, could God delight in our worship, because God cares for us; God cares what we do to one another, what we do for the oppressed and the weak.

I can't tell you what Amos saw going on in his days, in Palestine in 8th century BCE, but in our day, there are wars going on causing so much suffering, and discrimination that strips dignity off the people made in God's image but whom we consider as "other" and shun rather than welcome, and oppressive poverty and other social ills maintained by the systems that resist, or we resist to reform,

God is frustrated with us when we are the ones causing the suffering and oppression and dares us to do better and be better, for God's people know better and can do better, because God has shown us the way through the Scriptures and guides us with the Spirit, and God's justice and righteous is already there, waiting for us to **let** them roll down like waters and flow as a stream; therein is our hope.

God rejects all that's in us that render our worship empty and meaningless, even offensive to God, and call us into action: let the justice roll. God cares a lot about what we do; therein is our hope.

See how our hope is embedded in God's judgment? It is good Amos reminded us of this, because, as our journey through the Gospel of Matthew this liturgical year near ends, we will hear Jesus tell stories about the nature of God's kingdom in the end time, judgment that takes place when the kingdom of heaven is fully made manifest in Christ's return, his Second Coming. Like Amos' warning to Israelites anticipating the day of the Lord, there will be elements of surprise. Here now the Gospel. Matthew 25: 1-13

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

This story is unique to Matthew's Gospel. Matthew was writing for his church community, several decades after Jesus' crucifixion, and his people were fully expecting Jesus to return, soon. When Jesus didn't return soon, they needed encouragement to keep the expectant hope alive, in order to continue living out their faith, trusting in Jesus and following the way of God, in the face of hardships, like, being pushed out of the synagogue and facing persecution from the power that be. If they, the early church in the first century needed encouragement to keep the faith, how much more do we need it today? How are we to live while waiting for the coming of God's kingdom?

In this story, ten bridesmaids are waiting for the return of the bridegroom, so when he comes, they can accompany him to the wedding banquet. Jesus is the bridegroom, who is taking his time in returning. The wedding banquet is the kingdom of heaven. Simple enough. While they wait, ALL ten of them get tired and fall asleep, the wise and the foolish alike. Waiting is hard, especially it is for something we so long for, and especially if you are facing hardships.

Just as they all fell asleep, they all jumped up when the bridegroom's return is announced. They were all ready and willing to welcome the tardy bridegroom. The only thing that differentiated between the foolish and the wise is that the wise had taken flasks of oil with them so their lamp can continue to burn till the Lord's return, and the foolish hadn't.

Matthew's church was mostly Jewish, and so they had common understanding on some of the details of this parable. Jewish traditions used oil as a symbol of good deeds, while in other symbolism oil represents the Law of Moses, the Torah. Those who ran out of oil for their lamp want to borrow some from those who had it, but one cannot borrow others good deeds. Jesus' warning that it is not enough to call out "Lord, Lord" in order to enter the kingdom. The wedding banquet is reserved for those who do God's will, for those who have the oil of works of love and mercy, who let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a flowing stream.

Many of us who grew up Protestant often have allergic reaction to that the idea that one can "earn" one's place in heaven by doing good works, the belief in "salvation by works," or the theology of "works righteousness," and so we tend to undervalue "doing." True, it is not our good work that entitle us to be seated at the heavenly banquet, but both Amos and Jesus's parable reminds us God cares a lot about what we do, while we have our breath here on earth, how we treat one another, how we treat all God's creation; God expects us to have flasks of oil to keep our lamps burning, for that's what makes for peace, until he comes. Amen.