

This morning we have in our three readings-- the proclamation of the prophet Amos, a letter from Paul to his co-worker Timothy, the sharply-worded story from Jesus of a rich man and a poor man, Lazarus-- a consistent and emphatic message about the danger of being enveloped in riches. This message might make us a bit uncomfortable, but it needs to be embraced -- to be grasped.

AMOS Amos was a blue-collar guy, very bright and a member of the peasant class of Jewish society. He lived in the south, in the Kingdom of Judah about 750 BC and worked as a peasant *among the shepherds of Tekoa* (to use his own words in chapter one). Later, in chapter seven, Amos defines himself in this way: *I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."* (7:14-15)

He was compelled to go; he was called; he went North and entered the northern kingdom, the Kingdom of Israel at a time when that northern kingdom was benefitting from a time of peace and benefitting from being on a trade route. That route went through the Northern Kingdom and its capital Samaria and certain segments of that society were becoming incredibly rich. But other segments of that same society were suffering greatly, were being crushed not only by a huge disparity of rich and poor, but also by an incredible indifference and disregard. Rich folks were living in a bubble of wealth. Poor folks were being ground into the dust.

Amos begins his writings with **The Lord roars from Zion/ and utters his voice from Jerusalem.** The Lord roars and Amos, called by God, also roars out the message. Please look at our message in our insert today from chapter six:

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria. Alas for 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... who drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

Amos is speaking to the rich crowd in the capital city of Samaria and in his portrayal of them we see their self preoccupation and self indulgence. Take meat. Meat in the ancient world is reserved for times of feasting and celebration but here meat -- like it is in our nation as well-- is a casual thing for the rich.

They can have it any time. We see their laziness --lying on expensive beds made out of precious ivory. They drink wine in bowls which means that they drink it by the bowl full. We see their focus on things that pamper their lives. And we see their lack of concern for others. Amos says that they **are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph**. The ruin of Joseph is a reference to the poor and to their own nation. Here we see what happens when wealth overtakes us. It can put us in a bubble. It can lead us astray.

The ability of wealth to lead us astray becomes clear especially in our second lesson, our reading from Paul. Paul is writing to Timothy. These words came home to me last week: Take a look at the first few verses from I Timothy:

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have good and clothing, we will be content with these.

Contentment. America is a country marked by yearning, searching and discontent. Our advertisements that bombard us in the middle of Packer games or Brewer games, in the middle of news casts, in the middle of listening to Pandora and other music apps -- our advertisements cultivate a state of discontent and they promise us everything--the whole world if we would just buy something--always the next something.

What a contrast we see in Paul's perspective. He has found something deeply spiritual. **If we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.** And he promotes a lifestyle that he defines as **godliness combined with contentment.**

But some of you may think that I am nuts. Some of you may think that I am preaching this just because I am the priest here at Trinity and that is part of my job. Some of you may think that riches are okay as long as we keep them in a tight reign. But do we? It seems to me that both Amos and Paul see riches as a dangerous spiritual force. They see in the power of riches and in the focus upon money a negative spiritual force that can overtake us and put us on psychological if not physical beds of ivory until, wrapped up in our concerns (and indeed we have many legitimate concerns), we arrive at a point where we just do not care.

Notice the next few sentences:

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of

evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

Money is a commodity. When you have enough, life is good. When you have too little, life itself narrows down and becomes difficult. But when one has too much, money, too much wealth-- life can indeed become filled with **senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.** At the conclusion of this reading Paul provides some wise advice to his coworker in the final two sentences:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to be good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that is really life.

The life that is really life. In looking out beyond our own worries, in looking out beyond our own monetary resources be they slight or ample; in looking past the constant bombardment of marketing messages that cultivate yearning and a sense of inadequacy, there is for all of us this life in the Spirit. There is this relationship with God, there is this community for all of us, a community of faith. And all of it is linked to God, the Eternal.

As our Psalms reminds us this morning: **Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help/ whose hope is in the LORD their God.**

Trinity Platteville has a wonderful library just next door to the church and the other afternoon I found myself taking stock of some wonderful commentaries, theological writings, as well as devotional books -- all just next door. We could use a librarian.

Marcus Borg passed away just last year. Borg was raised a staunch Lutheran in Iowa, became an academic and for many years taught at Oregon State University. His writings are geared to a general audience and one of his books is ***Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but not Literally.*** Borg encountered the prophet Amos when he was in college. The Vietnam War was on. As is now, there was a climate of unrest, flux and concern. Values and assumptions were being challenged. Borg read Amos for the first time while taking a political philosophy course. He writes,

Amos was downright electrifying. ... In Amos, I heard for the first time the prophetic passion for social justice. Repeatedly ... he indicts the wealthy for their exploitation of the poor. Borg had no idea that prophets were like this. When Borg met Amos in college, he was a kind of lapsed Lutheran. He says *I was a 'practical atheist' or 'functional atheist' -- namely, a person who lived as if there were no God. And yet the Bible and Christianity remained very important to me.* So he read the prophets and went to seminary and graduate school to study religion. But God remained distant at best and unreal. Borg became an academic and remained a functioning atheist for many years. He writes **I did not imagine that God was an experiential reality for the prophets. I did not think of the prophets as having experiences of the sacred. The reason: I did not think that such experiences happened.** So the social message of the prophets was in; but a belief in God was out.

This is an important message to all of us in the church. Have we inherited our religion or do we claim it? Is it a tradition or do we actively seek to live and be in the presence of God? If we are surrounded by the allurements of wealth and abundance in our lives, do we yet cultivate a yearning and seeking for God? Do we strive to take hold of, in Paul's words today, **the life that is really life?**

But something happened to Marcus Borg when he read the prophet Amos for first time again. He saw not only the claims of social justice and the rightful castigation of Israel's society, he saw a relationship with God. Borg writes:

But now I am convinced that experiences of the sacred do happen, that the prophets had such experiences, and that such experiences were foundational for what ... [the prophets] were, said and did.

Later in his life, Borg entered back into the life of the Christian church as an Episcopalian because he began to understand faith not as a collection of right thoughts but faith as an active relationship in which we yearn and search for and encounter the Holy One.

Briefly this morning let me also mention Jesus. In his vivid story here we the life of a rich man placed next to a life of a poor man living with open sores that are licked by the dogs. Lazarus. In the tradition of Amos, Jesus also is a prophet concerned about wealth and indifference.

A few days ago Bronson Koenig the point guard for the University of Wisconsin basketball team, his brother Miles and one of his coaches, Clint Parks, took an 18 foot trailer loaded with all sorts of donated supplies, including two generators, to Sacred Stone Camp in North Dakota where 4000 protestors, mostly Native Americans from 200 tribes, are protesting the digging of an oil pipeline that potentially could pollute Standing Rock Reservation's only water supply -- the Missouri River. Koenig is one of 42 Native Americans now playing basketball for Division I teams. He came to hold a basketball camp for young Native American boys and girls who love basketball. He discovered that over the years Native American kids are more aware of him than they are of LaBron or Steph Curry. What he did there made an impression on them, but more of an impression on him.

Sacred Stone Camp is in the middle of nowhere. MSNBC reported *There is little economic activity to speak of and childhood mortality, suicide and dropout rates are among the highest in the nation. Food insecurity is vast. Access to quality healthcare and education is lacking. Far too many go without electricity or running water. These conditions are made worse by political and economic red tape that stymie growth and development.*

Koenig said *Just seeing the reservation and the condition that they live in.... It was pretty eye opening and made me appreciate everything that I have.* He also commented, *It was a life-changing experience. I'll remember it forever.* Do we see Native American people?

Amos and Jesus and Paul -- they all say it in one way or another ~ How much is enough? How much do we need? How much do we care? They also are saying that God is in their lives. That their experience of God and their encounter of God in their lives matters. And because it matters they can speak up in the case of Amos. And because it matters they can point to contentment in the case of Paul. And then there is Jesus: His whole life is before us; his whole life is a prayer; his whole life is framed by love: he stretched out his arms.

It was a life changing experience for Bronson --reaching out. For Marcus Borg, reaching out to God was also a life-changing experience. *Faith is a life changing experience. Once more, let us open ourselves up to the Spirit of God yearning to work in our midst and in our lives. Let us embrace the life that really is life.*

In the name of God--Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

~ The Rev. Brian E. Backstrand, Rector