

Amos 6:1-7

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 25, 2022

Many of us have eyesight problems. I'm nearsighted, especially in the left eye. Advancing age brought the need for bifocals. Without my glasses, the surroundings look pretty fuzzy. Perhaps some of you have similar conditions. More people have fuzzy vision when it comes to life and determining what's important. That was the situation in Israel and Judah at the time of Amos. God's spokesman dealt with the problems that resulted. As we listen to his warnings we must ask

WHERE'S YOUR FOCUS?

- I. On earthly security
- II. On worldly enjoyment
- III. On God's message

The leaders of both parts of the divided kingdom of God's people felt secure as they cast their gaze over their earthly positions. Amos served as a prophet of the Lord during the long rules of both Uzziah in the south, in Judah, and of Jeroboam II, who was king of the ten northern tribes called Israel. Their lengthy tenures of leadership provided stability. It was a time of prosperity and success, at least for some. The capital cities of Jerusalem and Samaria appeared safe.

Although he was a native of Judah, the ministry of Amos took him primarily to the Northern Kingdom but he also addressed Judah when the message fit. That was the case here.

Lessons could be learned from neighbors. The text identified three proud cities: Calneh, probably a place in Syria; Hamath, another Syrian city to the north; and Gath, a Philistine city near the Mediterranean coast. Then followed the question, "Are they better off than your two kingdoms? Is their land larger than yours?" There is debate about why Amos pointed to those cities—it could be quoting a boast of Israel's leaders about their equal greatness or it could be a reminder that God's blessings on his people made them just as bountiful as those world powers. He would be saying, "Remember the source of your position. You were nothing, but God stepped in, made you a nation, multiplied your population and gave you a land. Look what he has done for you"

The interesting fact about the cities named is that all three were soon destroyed. Who hears of them today? The sites of some are even uncertain. Clearly God

intended a message of warning. For some time Amos had been sounding the alarm, here strengthening the cry to, "Woe!" However, the leaders rejected any thought that danger could lie ahead. They "put off the evil day," that is, put the thought out of mind. Nothing to worry about. Oh yeah? It would come, whether they recognized it or not. The Lord had spoken.

Security is important to us. Providing security for its citizens is a function of government, defense against outside attacks and from criminal elements within. Those issues come up in political campaigns, in matters of national defense and granting bail or sentencing policies. We install security measures for our homes. We're concerned about cybersecurity, with all the information about us that is online, so we maintain lists of passwords to protect our accounts. We also strive to manage our resources to provide financial security for our families. In these efforts we need to recognize that not everything is in our hands. The Lord holds the future. The psalmist reminds us, "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes." We heard in the Second Lesson that he will never leave or forsake us and we need not fear. God gives us assurance that nothing can cause us real harm as his angels protect us and that he directs all things in our lives for a good purpose. His promises are what give us security. His power backs up his words. That's where our focus needs to be.

II.

The people of Israel and Judah, with misplaced confidence in their apparent success, spent their time focused on worldly enjoyment. They used their wealth for self-indulgence, like the rich man in today's Gospel reading, who "lived in luxury every day." Amos charged, "You lie on beds of ivory and lounge on your couches." Most homes then had little furniture. The people slept on the floor or on sort of an earthen shelf as they wrapped themselves in their cloaks. The wealthy people had fancy beds to sleep in at night and couches to lounge on during the day. As they sprawled there they dined on choice foods. Meat was served only on special occasions for most, but again the rich people commonly ate the best of tender lamb and veal. They filled their lives with entertainment. Music was for themselves and not to glorify God as David had done. In the description there is the hint that much of it was frivolous nonsense. Lots of drinking went on. The word Amos used for bowlfuls is actually the term for sacrificial bowls. Was he reflecting a desecration of the vessels of sacred worship, participation in pagan rituals or using the term to indicate the large quantity they consumed? None of those possibilities was good. The mention of lotions was a further sign of the pampering they gave themselves. They wrapped themselves in enjoyment of the high lifestyle they could afford, quickly forgetting the source of all they had, likely

taking personal credit for what they were surrounded with, provided by their ingenuity, effort or long hours of labor.

Compounding the problem was the fact that their riches were often ill-gotten. It is not wrong to use and enjoy blessings of God. We are thankful for all he has provided us. Earlier Amos told how the rich people in their society oppressed the poor and crushed the needy. They trampled on those already downtrodden, depriving them of justice in court as judges were bribed. Later he pointed out how they skimmed the measure and used dishonest scales in business transactions. Those conditions illustrated the great divide between the rich and the poor. In fact, ruins of some settlements that are excavated in archaeological digs reveal a wall separating the rich and poor areas of town. So the high opinions of good times for the two nations of God's people didn't look below the surface. Large problems loomed.

Hearing what the times were like back then carries a ring of familiarity, doesn't it? We need to reflect on our lifestyle. Do we acknowledge the source of our blessings? Do we use them in right ways and glorify the Giver more than ourselves? Of course, when we hear about the rich we probably think of others, but in reality we all are highly blessed, so this text calls for self-examination and reflection. Do we manage our resources wisely? "OK, I get it," some may be thinking. "This is where you ask for money, like the church always does." There is so much more involved. God is interested in how we treat others. We heard some ways in the Second Lesson such as entertaining strangers, caring for those in prison or helping those who are mistreated. How do we spend our leisure time? Where's your focus? Only on yourself and earthly thrills that do not last? Yes, our use of material possessions is involved, and giving for the Lord's work is an important part of that management. Do we reflect the love God has lavished upon us? Are our offerings proportionate to the blessings we have received?

There is a story about a man who had a child. It seemed being a parent always took money. There were groceries to buy, clothing and shoes to provide—aren't kids always growing out of them? Music lessons and sports practices were more things to keep running to and paying for. Sometimes it was rather exhausting. Then one day the man's child died. The father commented, "Now he doesn't need my money anymore." Do you think he was happy about it? Think of that man the next time you feel like complaining that the church needs money for something. What is number one in your life? Of course, our giving is properly more than responding to needs. God's goodness motivates our generosity. We are glad for the opportunity, yes, the privilege of supporting the work of bringing the gospel to

people. Look for more than earthly enjoyment.

III.

We know the better place to focus, and that is on God's message. That message announced disaster for Israel and Judah. "Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile," Amos told the high and mighty in the land. Defeat and captivity were coming. It would happen yet that same century for Israel, as the Assyrians vanquished them. In the following century Judah would fall to the Babylonians and spend seventy years in exile.

The feasting and the lounging, even the mistreatment of the poor and selfish behavior, were not the main point. Those conditions were outward symptoms of a deeper problem. The hearts of the leaders and the nation were not right with God. Idolatry was rampant in the land. Jeroboam II had military success but continued in the false worship of his namesake, who had set up calf worship in Bethel and Dan, bottom and top of his territory, so his subjects would not return to Jerusalem for worship. In the Southern Kingdom, despite having the temple in Jerusalem, the situation was not all that much better, as worship of the true God lost out to idolatry over time as well. The Word of the Lord fell on deaf ears. His ways were ignored. The consequences would be worse than defeat and captivity. Damnation is the final result for rejecting the Lord.

That does not have to be the last word that we hear. God's prophet was calling out then and still summons us today, "Repent!" Unlike the nations of Israel and Judah, admit your misplaced focus and wrong behavior while there still is time. Turn to the Lord for forgiveness. He has provided it in Jesus, whom he had promised to the world through his Old Testament people of Judah and whom he sent as our Savior. Jesus endured worse than loss of physical comfort. He gave up his life as he suffered the pains of hell that our sins deserved. He did that for the people living in the times of Amos, from before then and afterwards, in other words, for you and for me and for everyone. Hear his message of forgiveness in his Word and as you come to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion today. Trust him for full and free forgiveness and for eternal life. In that joy live in thankful love and serve your Savior with your whole heart. Dedicate each day to the glory of God.

Seeing the contrast between the need and the response of the people among whom Amos labored, where's your focus? Will it not be on the Lord and his message? Turn to him daily in repentant faith. Serve him with your whole being.