

“...The heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live...” (Ecclesiastes 9.3)

*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before the high God?*

*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
and what doth the LORD require of thee,
but to do justly, and to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with thy God? (Micah 6.6,8)*

a “just society” homily: d epravity such as ours

amos 5.10-13
june 6, 2022

*They hate those who call for justice in governance^a.
They abhor those who speak truthfully.
Therefore, because of your plundering of the vulnerable
by the grain taxes you extract from them,
you have built the most luxurious^b of homes,
but you will not live in them;
you have planted cherished vineyards
but you will not drink their wine.
For I am well aware^c of the magnitude of your criminality^d,
and the vastness of your corruption^e:
oppressing the innocent, taking bribes,
and deny the impoverished a hearing^f.
The one prospering in such times remains mute,
for such times are depraved (author’s translation).^g*

Amos was a brave man and faithful, honest messenger of God. We must honor him by being equally brave and honest. Indeed, he lamented the wickedness of cowardly and self-serving silence during depraved times such as ours. Such cowardly and self-serving silence is, in very truth, a sign of personal depravity—one that deepens societal depravity. Here, then, is his lament and warning.

The one prospering in such times remains mute,
for such times are depraved.

Those who are prospering because of societal depravity, going unscathed by its wickedness,

must not remain silent and inactive.

So, what sorts of times can be called, “depraved”? Amos describes some of them in this reading. For starters, in speaking of the wealthy and powerful, Amos charged,

“They hate those who call for justice in governance.
They abhor those who speak truthfully.”

This “justice in governance” takes in more than justice in our criminal justice system. It most certainly includes justice in legislative laws, policies, and programs. But it does most definitely include criminal justice. So, here is my breakout from muteness.

Recently, a sitting member of congress, Representative Louie Gohmert of Texas, complained in all seriousness and on camara before an audience of perhaps millions, “If you're a Republican, you can't even lie to Congress or lie to an FBI agent or they're coming after you.” Just let that sink in. A sitting member of congress is incensed that one cannot lie with impunity; incensed that liars might be held accountable.

This bit of depraved indifference to justice was spewed in response to the arrest of Peter Navarro against whom a grand jury of peers, after being presented with evidence, issued a two-count indictment for contempt of congress. In spite of having openly expressed his contempt for congress on camara before millions, Navarro has expressed outrage that he was arrested and handcuffed. Oh, the nerve of treating him like every other criminal! Don't they know who he is?

You see, both men think that the rich and powerful such as themselves should not be held accountable for their criminal behavior. Just like ancient Israel's wealthy and powerful, they attempt to establish one set of laws for the ordinary Joe and another set for the high and mighty. Gohmert, Navarro, dozens and dozens of U.S. representators and senators, and a certain treasonous former president despise justice and truth. They despise it as a basis of governance. And they certainly despise it as a basis for holding the wealthy and powerful accountable for their depraved indifference to justice.

Tragically, this American depravity is eerily similar to that which Amos observed in 8th century B.C. Israel and described in verse 10. But this is not the extent of 8th century B.C. Israelite depravity. Nor is it the extent—not even close—of America’s 2022 depravity. As Amos goes on to describe further and deeper depravities, so too must we.

We have discussed before the great American myth concerning wealth and power, asserted and perpetuated by none more loudly than the wealthy and power. To wit, wealth and power are the result of intelligence and skill and hard work—righteousness. But Amos, like all the Hebrew prophets whom God inspired to see the world as it really is rather than as the myth the powerful propagate, knows this to be a lie. If their wealth—typified by Amos in their luxurious homes and gardens/vineyards—is due to any skill, it is the skill of wickedness; of manipulating legal and legislative processes for their benefit and at the detriment of the poor. Their wealth and power are, in fact, built on the back of others. They are stolen.

“Therefore, because of your plundering of the vulnerable
by the grain taxes you extract from them,
you have built the most luxurious of homes,
but you will not live in them;
you have planted cherished vineyards
but you will not drink their wine.”

Over a century later, nothing had changed when the prophet Jeremiah credited the wealth and power of the wealthy and powerful to the same wickedness: deceit, injustice, and the violation of others.

“Just as a bird cage is full of birds,
their houses are filled with deceit.
This is why they have become powerful and wealthy;
They have grown fat and plump,
having gone beyond, even, the wicked words they speak.

They will not hear a legal case—
such as that of an orphan— least it succeeds.
Nor will they bring the cases of the needy to trial.”¹

Again, we must stress that this thievery takes place both in the spit-shinned floors of legislative halls and decorated chambers—overrun with the wealthy and powerful’s lobbying prostitutes—and in wood paneled courtrooms—inhabited by the wealthy and powerful dressed in their ten thousand dollar silk suits and red power ties. These are the playgrounds, or, better, the marketplaces of the wealthy and power where they buy and sell law makers, judges, and attorneys. Or, are these the places where they buy and sell the poor, powerless, and vulnerable? Yes, to all the above.

“For I am well aware of the magnitude of your criminality,
and the vastness of your corruption:
oppressing the innocent, taking bribes,
and denying the impoverished a hearing.”

The profits in selling the poor may not be high, but, hey, profit is profit.

“They sell out the innocent in order to turn a profit.
They sell out the impoverished in order to acquire a pair of sandals.
They lust after the dirt
that is found in the hair of the poor,
and make the life of those already distressed even more precarious.”²

So, here we are. Right back in the 8th century B.C. And just like way back then, “Social Justice” leaves a bad taste in the mouths of many. We can see why. It has ever been so. The wicked taketh the truth to be hard, for it cutteth them to the very center.”³ Or, as Amos put it,

¹ Jer. 5.²⁷⁻²⁸

² Amos 2.⁶⁻⁷

³ 1 Nephi 16.²

“They hate those who call for justice in governance.
They abhor those who speak truthfully.”

But, worse than “cutting them to the very center,” the idea of social justice threatens to cut into their profits, something that, in their blind wickedness, is of more value to them than their own immortal souls.

We would love to compose only light and happy fare filled with naught but “the pleasing word of God... which healeth the wounded soul.”⁴ But, we, like Amos, live in depraved times. We will not be complicit in the depravity through self-interested silence and cowardly inaction. We will, rather, like Amos, remind those whose conscious has not yet been completely “seared with a hot iron”⁵ that the word of God warns and informs; that sometimes, before it can comfort it must discomfort, sometimes with the sharpness of a “two-edged sword.”⁶ With its piercing warning, it can liberate us from the values and principles of the ungodly, the unethical, the corrupt, and the anti-social. It can liberate us from the depravities of our time and nation. It can guide us toward a society that is healthy and enduring. It can guide us into the kingdom of God.

So, yes, we are so bold as to invite others to avoid the muteness that has so often been found among those who have prospered in the midst of depravity; among those who dared not risk that which “moth and rust doth corrupt,”⁷ among those who have, themselves have not felt the pinch of injustice that so many have and do. Let’s not fall prey to same muteness of Amos’ day.

The one prospering in such times remains mute,
for such times are depraved.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

⁴ See Jac. 2.⁸

⁵ 1 Timothy 4.²

⁶ Hebrews 4.¹²

⁷ Matthew 6.¹⁹

^a Hebrew, *šā'ar*. Literally, “in the gate.” The city gate is where legal, legislative, and political decisions were often made. To think of the “gate” only as a place for legal court cases is wrongheaded. It is always a place where laws and policies are legislated. One can think of the Roman Forum, forum meaning originally, “open outdoor place.”

^b Hebrew, *gāzîṭ*. “This word indicates a particular type of dressed stone that was considered to be building material of the highest quality and of pleasing appearance” (*NIDOTTE*, Vol. x, p. x). The translation, “houses of ashlar masonry,” while accurate and literal does not send the message to the common reader who does not go beyond the page he or she is reading. With little appreciation for what is really being said, the reader can then hide behind ignorance and run the risk of behaving in the same despicable and punishable way. I am loath to be the cause for someone else’s justifying sin due to ignorance or the lack of clarity. Here, I show myself to be, as I am, more preacher and shepherd than scholar.

^c Hebrew, *yāda'*, “I know.”

^d Hebrew, *peša'*.

^e Hebrew, *ḥaṭṭā't*.

^f Hebrew, *šā'ar*, again. Literally, “from the gate they stretch the impoverished.”

^g For those who wish to compare, here is the KJV translation formatted in poetic verse.

They hate him that rebuketh in the gate,
and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly.
Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor,
and ye take from him burdens of wheat:
ye have built houses of hewn stone,
but ye shall not dwell in them;
ye have planted pleasant vineyards,
but ye shall not drink wine of them.
For I know your manifold transgressions
and your mighty sins:
they afflict the just, they take a bribe,
and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right.
Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time;
for it is an evil time.