



*"...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 homily on just society and our mad state of rebellion

healing our brokenness inadequately (part 7):

Crimes against humanity, and the renunciation of war

*"They heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:
'It's OK! It's OK!'
But nothing is OK!" (Jeremiah 6:14, author's translation).*

Introduction

Judicial inequality and injustice. Economic inequality and injustice. Rampant greed and fraud on the part of wealthy individuals and essential institutions. Bribery and corruption of government officials. Inordinate influence of the wealthy of laws and public policy. Unjust laws and policies favoring the powerful and influential while disadvantaging the less powerful and influential. The infliction of the vulnerable with hunger, homelessness, sickness, and anxiety. Self-righteous justification of the mad state of rebellion. Stubborn refusal to acknowledge these and a host of other societal ills.

No, I am not talking about America of 2024. However, if the shoe fits...

I am talking about late 6th and early 5th century B.C. Judah. These, and many other evils undermined the temporal, moral, and spiritual health of the nation. All the signs were there.

The nation was on the verge of collapse. It was in desperate need of truth, however sour it might be to the national palate. But the nation's shepherds fed the populace an empty diet of propagandistic myths of nationalism. Many of Israel's prophets joined the fray. Israel's watchmen, Jeremiah charged,

“Heal my people's brokenness inadequately, asserting:
‘It's OK! It's OK!’”

“But nothing,” Jeremiah replies, “is OK!”

Does this, too, sound familiar? Strike close to home? It should. Too often, today's religious leaders—whether they go by the name, “prophet,” “priest,” or “pastor”— seem to lack both discernment and courage. They seem utterly blind to and mute about sin and evil, unless, of course, it involves some form of real or imagined sexual deviance. If they do speak out, it is often with muted, vague, delicate, and generalized voices and statements. These shepherds seem not up to the challenging task of bold and clear truth telling of the sort that our society so desperately needs. Now is not the time for delicacy and caution.

This homily is the seventh in an ongoing series entitled, “Healing Our Brokenness Inadequately,” based on Jeremiah 6.¹⁴ In this series, we explore specific examples of individual and societal sins about which political and religious leaders all too often remain willfully blind or, if sighted, stubbornly mute... and therefore complicit. Tragically, sometimes their complicity is even active and enthusiastic. With these examples in mind, we will often call upon the classic Hebrew prophets as well as other ancient and not so ancient prophets to speak as if from the dust. We read these discerning writings in light of the societal ills and injustices that abound in our modern world. Sometimes we even imagine and take a stab at replicating what a Hebrew prophet might have to say if he were to come to us from the past.

In today's homily, we offer another example of our brokenness about which too many remain silent and worse, in which too many engage themselves. Such moments as ours desperately

cry out for the type of discernment, boldness, and truth-telling so characteristic of the Hebrew prophets.

Renouncing war

rə' nouns.

According to the Online Etymological Dictionary, this word comes from Latin, *renuntiare*, “bring back word; proclaim; protest against,” from *re-* “against” + *nuntiare*, “to report, announce.” *Nuntiare* is related to *nuntius*, “messenger.” In the late Middle Ages, the word also came to mean “give up, resign, surrender, cede.”

We highlight this word and its meaning because in this homily, and consistent with the current Lent Season, we will engage in a bit of renunciation. Our renunciation is consistent with obligations that scripture places upon disciples of Christ. We have utilized this passage before.¹ Here, we wish to have a closer look at it than we have done in the past. First, here is the passage.

“Therefore, be not afraid of your enemies, for I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that I will prove you in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me.

Therefore, *renounce war* and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children; and again, the hearts of the Jews unto the prophets, and the prophets unto the Jews; lest I come and smite the whole earth with a curse, and all flesh be consumed before me.”²

In considering the many principles found in this passage, we first note the command:

“renounce war and proclaim peace.” If this command is to be fulfilled, it is not enough for

¹ See, for example, “Healing our Brokenness Inadequately (part 6): US Law and More Weapons, More War, More Retribution, More Death.”

² DC 98.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

individuals to offer “thoughts and prayers” for peace. It is not enough for institutions to issue vague, delicate, or generalized media statements about their desire for peace. It is not even enough to issue generalized calls—individual or institutional—for peace. We must “renounce war” clearly and specifically.

Certainly, in renouncing war we, ourselves, give up war and surrender the idea that war serves as a means of achieving peace or any kind of human endurance and advancement. But the call to renounce war is more comprehensive than this. Our words and actions must take on the aspect of clear, bold, and specific protest against war.

“Second, we note that our renunciation of war and our calls for society to renounce war is a firm and Divine test of our faithfulness. It is a standard against which our worthiness to think of ourselves as disciples of Christ, to be thought of by others as disciples of Christ, and, most importantly, to be thought of by Christ himself as his disciples is set.

“I have decreed in my heart, saith the Lord, that *I will prove you* in all things, whether you will abide in my covenant, even unto death, that you may be found worthy. For if ye will not abide in my covenant ye are not worthy of me. *Therefore*, renounce war and proclaim peace...”

Those who refuse to renounce war fail a Divine test. They do not abide in the Lord’s covenant. They are not worthy. They are not worthy of Christ, being, in their silent refusal to renounce war, unlike the Savior.

Third, we note that the call to renounce war is linked to and consistent with the “Spirit of Elijah.” It is the Spirit of Elijah that inspires individuals and institutions to renounce war.

“Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace, *and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children.*”

This admonition harkens back to the well-known final two verses of the Hebrew Bible.

“Understand: I am going to send ’Ēlîyâ, the prophet, to you before the coming, totally awe-inspiring day of YHWH. He is to restore the love of parents for children and the love of children for parents so that when I arrive, I need not strike the earth with annihilation (author’s translation).³

If we did not already know that the “Spirit of Elijah” goes far, far beyond our too narrow interpretation of it to include far more than generationally united and linked families through temple instruction and ordinances, DC 98.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ educates us to that spirit’s expanded meaning, intentions, and labors. The Spirit of Elijah calls to those who partake of it to “renounce war and proclaim peace” not simply between moms and dads and children, but between whole populations, societies, and nations. The Spirit informs all individuals, populations, societies, and nations—past, present, and future—that there is existential endurance only through acknowledging that we are bound together and must live as one or die. The labors that the Spirit of Elijah enjoins is not for the eternities only, but for the here and now. The end of war is how the globe with its billions survives in the cosmos. If war is not renounced, but allowed to continue, it can only eventually bring the annihilation of the human race.

Fourth, laboring in the Spirit of Elijah is not limited to comfortable chairs and relaxed, air conditioned sacred spaces. The renunciation of war is not easy or without cost. Such renunciation takes place in the wide open world where it is highly unpopular. The renunciation of war will be considered unpatriotic. It will be thought evil. True to the satanic sentiment and spirit as expressed in the LDS temple, those who renounce war and proclaim peace as God requires, will be thought of, as all truth-tellers are, as “molesters.” The renunciation of war will incite intimidation, threats, and violence.

For all these reasons and more, the Lord’s call to renounce war and proclaim peace is prefaced with the admonition/ encouragement that we “be not afraid of [our] enemies... even unto death.” Jesus died being true to this admonition against fear. He did not allow fear to keep him from truth-telling, no matter the cost. Those who abide in the Lord’s covenant and

³ See, for example, our homily on Malachi 4.⁵⁻⁶ entitled, “The Spirit of Elijah: An Expanded View.”

are worthy of him will not be intimidated into silence but will renounce of war and proclaim peace.

Finally, we note that the “Spirit of Elijah” not only turns hearts one to another. It turns “the hearts of the Jews unto the prophets, and the prophets unto the Jews.” It is requisite according to the Lord’s understanding of the Spirit of Elijah that the Jewish people accept, give heed to, and act upon prophetic insights. Then, contrary to the criticism that the Hebrew prophets have always leveled against their own people, the prophets can finally, without incurring the disapproval of God, boldly advocate for the Jewish people.⁴

a series of crimes against humanity

Now then. This talk of the call to renounce war and of the Jewish people brings us back to where we began in our introduction: the Hebrew prophets. The Hebrew prophets were certainly and specifically called to minister to their own people. All too often the prophets’ Jewish audiences refused to turn their hearts to the prophet who delivered an unwelcome message. However, the prophets also kept a discerning eye on the world stage and often felt compelled to comment on it. They often leveled the same kind of criticism against other nations’ wickedness that they leveled against Israel and Judah—often for the same evils.

Isaiah, for example, devotes an entire section of his Book, chapters 13-23, to imprecation against Israel’s neighboring nations.⁵ Ezekiel does the same, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, Egypt, and Seir/ Idumea all coming under his purview and condemnation.⁶

Before either of these two great Hebrew prophets, Amos informed himself of international affairs and took it in hand to critique and utter imprecations against the nations that neighbored Israel, including its sister nation, Judah. And, lest we forget, this herdsman of

⁴ God commanded Jeremiah not to advocate for the people (See, for example, Jeremiah 14.¹¹). Jeremiah disregarded this command and did it anyway (See, for example, 14.¹⁷⁻²²). The Lord responded to Jeremiah’s disobedience (See, for example, Jer. 15.¹).

⁵ Babylon (13.¹⁻¹⁴.²³ and 21.¹⁻¹⁰), Assyrian (14.²⁴⁻²⁷), Philistia (14.²⁸⁻³²), Moab (15.¹⁻¹⁶.¹⁴), Syria (17.¹⁻¹⁴), Cush (18.¹⁻⁷), Egypt (19.¹⁻²⁰.⁶), Edom (20.¹¹⁻¹²), Arabia (21.¹³⁻¹⁷), Judah! (22.¹⁻²⁵), and Tyre (23.¹⁻¹⁸).

⁶ See Ezekiel 25.¹⁻³².³² and 35.¹⁻¹⁵.

Tekoa followed his critique and imprecations against Israel's neighbors with critiques and imprecations against his own people, Israel, filling a whole Book in cataloguing a whole host of Israelite crimes—crimes not only against humanity but against God. But this catalogue of Israelite sins and imprecations will have to await another time for our attention. For now, we will slow down and have a detailed look at Amos' observations about Israel's neighboring nations and their crimes—crimes, as we will see, that were crimes against humanity.

Amos begins with Israel's neighbor to the northeast, Syria.

“This is what YHWH says:

‘Because of a series of Dammešeq’s crimes,
topped off with this last one,

I will not relent:

because of their threshing Gil‘ād with iron threshers.’”⁷

As God indicates, He could have settled on any one of many national crimes of which Syria was guilty. But He settled on this crime: “their threshing Gil‘ād with iron threshers.” Syria was guilty of attacking Israel's northern territories and murdering its inhabitants. There can be little doubt that most victims were innocent noncombatants. The choice of threshing as imagery for this attack is meant to emphasize the brutal and vicious nature of the attack. It was a crime against humanity. While the Syrian crime upon which the Lord settles was one perpetrated against Israel, not all the crimes mentioned in the following survey were. Syria's sin would have been a crime against humanity and God no matter the nation targeted.

God next turns to Gaza, Israel's enemy to the west.

“This is what YHWH says:

‘Because of a series of ‘Azzâ’s crimes,
topped off with this last one,

⁷ 1.³

I will not relent:

because of their stripping deportees buck naked,
and delivering them over to 'Eḏôm.'"⁸

In considering Gaza's crimes, the Lord settled on a common practice found throughout the ancient world of the Near East. With the military defeat of a region, the victor often rounded up the surviving non-combatant population, stripped individuals naked and beat them, and then publicly paraded the naked, bleeding, bruised, and terrified victims for others to see. This served as an effective form of propaganda and intimidation; a warning that resistance was futile and would be met with maximum punishment, pain, and humiliation.

But the cruelty did not end there. Those humiliated and treated like parade animals were then sold into slavery for profit. This was a crime against humanity. We should probably understand Gaza's crime to be related to Syria's and to build upon it. Violent butchery of innocent noncombatants was often followed by humiliation of survivors. We might assume the captives of whom Amos speaks here were Israelites, but the text does not say this. We cannot be certain which nation Gaza so victimized in this instance.

The Lord now sets His sights on Tyre, a neighbor to the northwest of Israel.

“This is what YHWH says:

‘Because of a series of Šōr’s crimes,
topped off with this last one,

I will not relent:

because of their delivering deportees buck naked to 'Eḏôm,
and not honoring the covenant of alliance.’”⁹

Tyre's crime is essentially the same as Gaza's. However, the Lord adds one element to the crime. Tyre's criminal mistreatment and sale into slavery of captives was perpetrated against

⁸ 1.⁶

⁹ 1.⁹

those with whom it had previously entered into alliance. Not only was the nation guilty of crimes against humanity, but of breach of treaty and “international law” as well. Again, this crime should be viewed as building upon and clarifying the nature of the previous crimes. Again, Amos does not specify Israel as the victim of Tyre’s inhumanity. The fact is that every one of the nations mentioned in Amos’s survey had at one time or another entered into treaties with every one of the other nations. So, each stipulated crime was perpetrated in spite of previous agreements, treaties, and alliances. These nations were not only cruel, they were unfaithful and untrustworthy partners in international affairs.

Edom, Israel’s neighboring nation to the south of Judah is next on the Lord’s survey of nations and their crimes against humanity.

“This is what YHWH says:

‘Because of a series of ’E_dôm’s crimes,
topped off with this last one,

I will not relent:

because of its pursuit of an ally with a sword.

It flouted compassion,

perpetually fed its anger,

and maintained its rage continually.’”¹⁰

Again, Israel is not specified as the target of Edom’s excesses. Like the nations before it, Edom was guilty of violent war against and cruel treatment of other nations: crimes against humanity. We should certainly understand this violence and cruelty in terms previously described: brutal as threshing, humiliating as striping and parading, and for profit. Like Tyre, Edom was guilty of breach of treaties and alliances: it pursued “an ally with a sword.”

But the Lord adds another element to the crimes: the purposeful and calculated harboring of hatred, anger, and rage. Any suggestion of compassion or balance in response to threats and aggression was consciously rejected. Crimes against humanity were not simply committed in

¹⁰ 1.¹¹

the heat of the moment. They were thought out, planned, and ruthlessly executed.

Next, Ammon, Israel's eastern neighbor, comes under the divine microscope.

“This is what YHWH says:

‘Because of a series of B^enê-‘Ammôn’s crimes,
topped off with this last one,

I will not relent:

because of their splitting open pregnant Gil‘ādean women
in order to expand their territory.’”¹¹

Here, we are back to Gilead and crimes that the Ammonites committed against Israel. Few are more innocent or more vulnerable to attack than pregnant women. They represent no threat to an opposing and invading army. Yet, Ammon brutally killed them and their unborn babies. This is a crime against humanity. And, like those before them who sold captives into slavery for profit, Ammon perpetrated its brutality against innocent women and unborn children for profit. The profit came not in the form of payment for slaves, but in additional land. It can seem at times that the nations of this world compete to see who can be the most despicable in their behavior toward their enemies. The Ammon that Amos targets with his criticisms certainly earns a ribbon.

We now come to the last of Israel's neighbors that come under Amos' criticism—we will take up his criticism of Judah at another time. Moab was Israel's neighbor to the southeast. It too was guilty of crimes against humanity.

“This is what YHWH says:

‘Because of a series of Mō‘āb’s crimes,
topped off with this last one,

¹¹ 1.¹³

I will not relent:

because of its burning to ash the bones of 'Edôm's king.'"¹²

We do not know the history behind this crime, but we can make several observations. First, neither the nation of Israel nor any Israelite citizen is the target of this atrocity. This should direct us away from any thought that Amos surveyed the crimes that he did because they were perpetrated against Israel or that it was the targeting of Israel that caused God to act against the criminal states. The historical record is clear. Even Syria's and Ammon's brutal crimes, mentioned in 1.³ and 2.¹ respectively, as having been committed in and against Gilead were most certainly committed by other nations against nations other than Israel. Assyria, for example, perfected the national pastime of crimes against humanity—and we can find them committing crimes such as Amos' surveyed.

Second, we have the matter of Moab's cremation of Edom's king. Cremation was not a widely accepted or used method of disposing of the dead. Physical burial was an important aspect of the deceased's afterlife. In ancient Near Eastern culture, cremating a defeated enemy's remains was as high a form of contempt, disrespect, and humiliation as any—akin to the beheading and otherwise mutilation of the body of a defeated enemy and then hanging them in public. Burning the body was the height of disrespect for the humanity of another. Not only had Edom's king lost his life, most likely violently, but in cremating him, Moab threatened his very eternal existence. This act shows a degree of hatred, wage, and vengeance that is gratuitous and excessive. It goes beyond the pale.

We might add, here, that cremating a human body so that it is reduced to mostly ash requires high temperatures and is, in an ancient culture such as Moab's, labor intensive. This, expenditure in resources and time too, shows the Moabite commitment to harboring anger, resentment, and malice just as Edom was portrayed as doing in 1.¹¹.

Amos' oracles against Israel's neighboring nations paints quite the picture, no? Nations attack each other in the most brutal fashion. Even if the violent death of warriors and soldiers

¹² 2.¹

could be shrugged off as natural and inevitable, not so the death and torture of innocent non-combatants and the mistreatment of survivors. The violent death and mutilation of innocent non-combatants in war is unacceptable and inhumane. The helpless enslavement of one's defeated enemies is unacceptable and inhumane. The brutalization of defeated enemies for propaganda and intimidation is unacceptable and inhumane. The use of war to profit and expand is unacceptable and inhumane. The harboring of and basking in resentment, anger, and rage against one's enemies is unacceptable and inhumane. The use and manipulation of resentment, anger, and rage to inspire militancy is unacceptable and inhumane. The willful breaking of treaties and alliances is unacceptable and inhumane.

All this is humane, Amos would have it, no matter the perpetrator or the target of the inhumanity. The one showing inhumanity to another is inhumane. The inhumanity against another diminishes the humanity of the other. And all this, God sees. All this, God sees, has consequences. All this, God sees, brings yet more inhumanity, more brutality, more wrath, more destruction, more death. Left unchecked, God knows, all this brings annihilation.

No doubt the picture that Amos paints of his day could be painted of every era of human history—certainly the crimes against humanity committed between nations during the Middle Ages can stand toe to toe with those committed by Israel's neighbors against each other. Unfortunately, humanity has not outgrown such inhumanity even to this day. Sadly, and in keeping with our commitment to avoid speaking in parables but to speak with clarity, specificity, and boldness, it is to modern humanity's inhumanity that we must now turn.

† Today in Israel, Syria, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, et al

We are all familiar with the tragic events of October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked Israel, killing some 1500 mostly civilian non-combatants. The attack was accompanied by heinous acts of violence, hatred, rage, and brutality not unlike those that Amos describes in his survey of national crimes committed by Israel's neighbors against one another.

What are we to do? What are we to think? What are we to say when we hear reports of

brutality against civilians: against old men and women, against children, against teenagers, against expectant mothers, against mothers, against fathers? How can we not think of ancient Syria's threshing of Gilead or of ancient Ammon's splitting open pregnant women of the same region? How can Amos' Edom of long ago not come to mind—that Edom that “flouted compassion, perpetually fed its anger, and maintained its rage continually”?

Some things never change. We must condemn such brutality in the strongest possible terms. Those who perpetrated this hateful and heinous brutality must be held to account. We cannot be too harsh on such brutality and those who perpetrate it. Or can we?

What are we to do? What are we to think? What are we to say when the response to such brutality is the same brutality multiplied many times over?¹³ What are we to do, think, say when that single day of heinous terror perpetrated against the people of Israel is followed by month after month of equally heinous terror perpetrated against the Palestinian people—civilians, 60% of whom are under 18? What are we to do, think, and say when a nation requires the payment of 30,000 civilian Palestinian lives—4 in 10 of them children, that's 12,000 dead children— for 1,500 Israeli civilian lives? What are we to do, think, and say when, increasingly, Israel inflicts suffering and death upon the Palestinian people in the most cowardly fashion.

It has become increasingly clear that, as one observer put it, “Israel is intentionally starving Palestinians... The speed of malnourishment of young children is also astounding. The bombing and people being killed directly is brutal, but this starvation – and the wasting and stunting of children – is torturous and vile. It will have a long-term impact on the population physically, cognitively and morally ... All things indicate that this has been intentional... We have never seen a civilian population made to go so hungry so quickly and so completely, that is the consensus among starvation experts...” Israel is not just targeting civilians, it is trying to damn the future of the Palestinian people by harming their children.”

¹³ We discussed this multiplication of brutality on the part of the Israeli government in a homily based on 1 Kings 12.¹⁻¹⁶, entitled, Of Pinky Fingers, Thighs, and Eyes for an Eye.

“Intentionally starving civilians by ‘depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including willfully impeding relief supplies’ is a war crime, according to the Rome statute of the international criminal court. Indispensable objects include food, water and shelter – which Israel is systematically denying Palestinians. Starvation is a war crime under the Geneva Conventions and the Rome Statute. It was also recognized as a war crime and general violation of international law by the UN security council in 2018....”¹⁴

How is Israel’s starving of infants, including the most vulnerable in neonatal hospital units, any different than ancient Ammon’s “splitting open pregnant Gil’ādean women”? It isn’t.

What are we to do, think, and say, then, when Israeli political and military leaders give way, as Edom did long ago, to the madness of blind and unyielding rage and excessive violence; when they too “flout compassion, perpetually feed their anger, and maintain their rage continually”?

No, things have not changed much since Amos’ day. The fact is, in this latest permutation of hatred, rage, and brutality one cannot tell the “good guys” from the “bad guys.” The region is an epidemic of inhumanity.

Conclusion and benediction

Truly and clearly, there are no good guys in this latest Near Eastern conflict. Truly, Israeli and Palestinian alike act as the nations of whom and to whom Amos spoke so long ago. Truly both commit the great crime that sent God to weeping in anticipation of the flood. God had great hopes that human beings would “love one another, and that they should choose me, their Father.” “But behold,” that Holy God lamented, “they are without affection, and they hate their own blood.”¹⁵

In this latest manifestation of generational hatred, rage, violence, and brutality, we do not

¹⁴ “Israel is deliberately starving Palestinians, UN rights expert says,” Nina Kakhani, The Guardian.

¹⁵ See Moses 7.³³

take sides. We are not for Palestinians. We are not for Israelis. We are for God. We side with Him. However mute and muted the prophets, priests, and pastors are, we will not be silent or ambiguous. We accept God challenge, the proof of our covenant faithfulness, and our worthiness to consider ourselves and be considered by others as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace. For this reason, we, as commanded by the Prince of Peace, renounce war wherever we see it—from the snow-covered ground of Ukraine to the desert sands of Gaza.

Our commitment to accept this aspect of the call to discipleship is also inspired by the Spirit of Elijah. The nation of Israel must turn its heart to the prophets, especially, in this instance, to the prophet Amos and his all too relevant criticisms of nations that engage in crimes against humanity. Individuals and the nations they create must learn that God prizes every human being no matter their nationality, religion, race, gender, etc. Nations and their citizens must learn that we are all connected, linked through God's intense love. We must learn that we cannot break the link with each other without breaking our link with God. And we cannot break our link with each other and with God without threatening our own existence in fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible's final warning—annihilation.

“Lord, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked triumph?”¹⁶

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: april 5, 2024)

¹⁶ Psalm 94.³