

>> As you heard earlier, the O.T. lesson is from the book of Amos. And I found some very interesting facts about the life and times of the people back then.

>> Interesting, because they will sound familiar to you from the parallels we can draw today from what was happening back in 8th century B. C.

>> Hopefully, this info will help the passage come to life for you , give a better understanding of what Amos was about, and show what God's word through Amos means for us today!

>> At the time this passage was written, the Kingdom was divided into 2 sections: the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Jeroboam II was the king of Israel, the Northern Kingdom, who reigned for 40 years with the seat of power being in Samaria. Under Jeroboam's leadership the Northern Kingdom became a very powerful country. It extended its border and took control of the trade routes of the day. As a result there was a diverse merchant class that settled in the North and became extremely prosperous! Citizens enjoyed a good life. Political and military affairs were in good order. The nation was affluent and secure!

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>> Now, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel there were two sanctuaries or worship centers; Bethel and Gilgal. Amaziah, who we read about in the O.T. lesson, was a supervising priest at the Temple in Bethel. He was a member of the Corps of Cultic priests. As a result, he preached prosperity for the state and disaster for its enemies! Remember that, it is very important! This was based on the religious conviction that the nation of Israel's existence was God's intentions and it was safe from assault or violation by any other nation as a result! What Amaziah personified was a state religion, a captive to national interest in the status quo. So, basically Amaziah's message as a priest was indistinguishable from that of the local Chamber of Commerce!

>> To make matters worse, wealthy citizens would fill the worship space. And there, priests and prophets who belonged to the guilds, who had to speak to earn a living, would reinforce this idea that the nation's prosperity was a sign of God's favor. If the people heard what they wanted, the priests received lavish offerings which was the equivalent of their paycheck! So, the priests weren't inclined to say or do anything to dampen the mood because it would affect their paycheck! Self-interest was at the heart of the religion- which in this case, was a national religion!

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>> THIS is the context into which Amos comes..... A shepherd and pruner of sycamore or fig trees... something eaten only by the poor! He had no professional training for religious office! AND he lived 5 miles south of Bethlehem- which means he was from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. So he was an outsider!

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>> Through his occupation though, he traveled to large cities that allowed him to be a keen observer of life around him. And what he saw was power abused by those in high positions, how culture excluded many in society, how rich merchants and nobility were building huge elaborate homes while small farmers were dispossessed to make development of their estates possible. He saw harassment of the poor by the prosperous, people being sold into slavery for a pair of shoes. He saw the cause of justice sold for bribes and people starving needlessly. There was corruption in both civil and religious institutions.

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>> It was to THIS- that God called Amos to denounce Israel's errant sense of security, tolerance of social injustice, immorality, and false piety!

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>> Particularly, it was the silence of the professional prophets, their failure to speak to the critical situation of the time, the Word of God- that forced the shepherd Amos to take a stand! For this, along with the lies Amaziah told Jeroboam, Amos was charged with treason for having conspired against the palace, ridiculed for his prophecy, and told to return home and never set foot in Bethel again!

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>> And what was Amos' reply? "I am not a professional prophet, nor a member of any guild. My prophesy has nothing to do with earning a living. I am just a shepherd whom the Lord chose and called to prophesy to the people of Israel." It is our nature isn't it, to want to kill the messenger for something that will make us take a hard look at ourselves and our ways that need to change!

>> Amos was called to serve in this special way. Maybe he was uncomfortable about doing this! He could have said 'No' to God! But he didn't! He trusted God, came outside of himself, and spoke by divine authority against those who used power over people for their own advantage and gain! And this included institutions!

>> From these facts we have a better understanding of what was happening in today's OT lesson as well as a better understanding of what a prophet is about, particularly Amos!

>> Prophets of God, are people, (are you and I), called to be sensitive to what is happening in the world around them with God's people.... called to be in tune with what God wills.... and to challenge those who go against the will of God, which is always opening anew to us!

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>> They are champions of the oppressed, the poor and powerless. And when injustice is practiced prophets cannot but speak out for God against those who cause the injustices and those who permit it!

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>> That is why Amos spoke out- boldly and courageously- taking risks, putting self aside - to say what he did. It was his ministry to speak the word of God to those who were frustrating the will of God for all people!

>> And that was a word of accountability. It was a call to return to faithfulness. To repent and change, to 'hate evil and love well and establish justice at the gate.' (Amos 5:15a) Amos was a part of God's design, and so are we!!!

>> God calls US to be prophets, to be sensitive to the needs of those around us- not so we may self-righteously judge another's actions or motives- but to be in tune with God and God's will- that we all may lovingly live in God's ways!

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>> God was sending Amos to the people of Israel asking them to repent! Repentance- it is not a word we Christians like. In Greek, the word is 'metanoia' which is a biblical word so rich in meaning that it cannot adequately be translated by one English word.

>> It expresses the idea of 'sorrow for sin' to be sure, but it means so much more. It means a change of mind, of heart, of intention, of disposition, a whole new attitude, and a reversal of values.... a re- turning to God centeredness!

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>> But we don't change for the sake of change. To repent is to change for the sake of the kingdom. It is born out of God's deep love for us and our response to that love!

>> We are told that John the Baptizer prepared the way for the coming of Jesus by proclaiming a baptism of repentance and the crowds asked, 'What are we to do?'

>> (Lk 3:10). So, where do we begin? With God! It always starts with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit!

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>> Matt 6:31 tells us to seek first the kingdom of God. We need to begin by turning our faces and hearts to God and by looking at our own relationship with God... how we nurture and act on it, by looking at ourselves- not others! In terms of repentance,

>> Matt. 7 states, 'Judge not, that you be not judged..... Take the log out of your own eye.. .'

>> This means we are to concern ourselves with OUR relationship with God in Christ.

>> It is important to say at this point, that our relationship with God is at least 2 fold; one is the corporate relationship,(WE are the Body of Christ), and the other is our personal, not private, but personal relationship! And the two are inseparable! Despite what some people say, there can't be one without the other! But that is for another sermon!

>> Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and spiritual author states, "The mature true purpose of religion is to allow us to experience who we are (meant to be) in God and who God is in you and then live a generous and just life from that infinite Source! "

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>> You know, through our baptism we are not only called to be in tune with God's will and be sensitive to God's people- we are also empowered to act. God has given us what we need to do what God wants us to be about and do! All we need to do is to trust and to open ourselves to God!

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>> 'Brand' is the name of a drama written by Henrik Ibsen. It is about a man struggling through a terrible blizzard in the icy wastes of Norway. An observer seeing the man cries out, "Go back!" Brand's reply, "I can't, I am on a mission for someone great, whose name is God!"

>> May that be so for us too Lord, that You and Your mission so fill us that we cannot keep from sharing your love with others through loving words and actions, all in name of Jesus the Christ! Amen!