

Order of Worship for September 15, 2013, title, “Our God”, text, Amos 1:1-3:8
Opening Song:

Welcome and Invocation: Amos 1:1-3:8
Ministry Moment

Message Theme: The God of the New Testament is the same as the God of the Old Testament; therefore we must not think He is a God of grace without judgment or a God of love without discipline

Worship Theme: Praising the greatness and holiness of God

Sunday Evening in the Word
Effective and Fruitful Faith: 2 Peter 1:1-15
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm in the Church Library

Opening Song:

“How Great is Our God”

Overhead

Welcome

Invocation:

Amos 1:1-3:8

Special Music:

“Be Thou My Vision”

By Rebecca Hammonds, Bev Gentry & Heidi Lundberg

Ministry Moment:

Men’s Ministry

Iron Sharpens Iron and Princess Tea

Offering and Offertory

Preparing the Heart in Song:

“Revelation Song”

Overhead

“Holy Holy Holy”

Song # 3

“Before the Throne of God Above”

Overhead

Message:

Amos 1:1-3:8

“Our God”

Pastor John Bronson

Closing Song:

“How Great Thou Art”

Song # 147

Parting Word of Grace and Invitation to Prayer

Sunday Evening in the Word:

5:30-7 pm in the Church Library

Effective and Fruitful Faith: 2 Peter 1:1-15

“The Prayer Closet”

September 15, 2013

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”

(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

Lois McMartin and EFCA ReachGlobal Ministries: the Lord will protect our ministry presence from hostile awareness especially in places of violence and fear; the Spirit will guide Lois to those personnel with special needs for counsel, the people we serve will see us as agents of peace and reconciliation as well as hope for now and eternity

President Obama: the Spirit will ground his heart and mind in the truth and draw him to seek the wisdom of God; the Lord will over-ride decisions that might lead our nation into folly and war; the Father will preserve him and his family in peace and as agents of peace

Children’s Ministries: the Lord will sustain and protect the teachers as they begin a new year of instruction with the children; the Spirit will open the hearts and minds of the children to learn; the Father will draw new family and children to the church

Military or Public Service Personnel of the Week: David Alpern, Army (son of Jennifer): for God’s direction and will for his life to be made apparent.

Young Adult of the Week: Seth Duenas (son of Rudy and Tracie): to seek God’s will and glorify Him in all decisions.

Please pray for the health and recovery of our church family: Bob Boettcher, Carol Bernerd, Carol Gray, Carole Lindsey, Dick & Jane Miller, Ellen McNabb, Joe Avery, Phil Peterson, Randy Bowen

(please call the office to request updates)

I have entitled the message for this morning [Our] God. The text as I read [earlier in the service] is Amos 1:1 and goes all the way to 3:8, for I intend at the end of the service to wrap us round and land there. I am not going to cover all those verses, that is just not possible.

What I want to do now is to give what I entitled a current context for the study of Amos. This will be a longer introduction than you have normally heard, but because we are going back to a [section of the Old Testament] that is not normally picked up and read I felt like I wanted to give a frame of reference so you understand what I am doing.

We are social beings. Humans naturally congregate. They form families, tribes, societies for mutual benefit. It is best if this effort to associate with others is rooted in and motivated by love, but it is not necessary. Other motivations serve: ambition, pride, fear. Perhaps the greatest example of such an alternative for integrating [or] knitting together a dynamic society was spelled out by a man named Adam Smith. He explained that if humanity would be willing to put in place what we understand today as a capitalistic economy in which every individual, or actually every productive or creative unit was free to produce whatever he or she could and exchange it freely for whatever other goods and services others would provide, that soon there would be a maximization of creativity and production fueled by every person's pursuit of self-interest. Mr. Smith's book "Wealth of Nations" has exercised a powerful influence in virtually every nation of the world. Wealth for all would increase and life would be improved for all.

When he wrote his book Adam Smith did not intend or expect that his recommendations for economic activity would become a comprehensive moral system covering every aspect of life and thereby supplanting the moral principles of the Bible and the effects of the outworking of the gospel for both the individual and the community. That has, however, happened. And it has happened with destructive consequences. People, as a matter of fact, are not merely productive units any more than they are merely consumers capable of propelling the economy with their self-serving and self-seeking purchases. Whether or not a person believes in God or the idea that there is a divine purpose for our lives, the fact of the matter, as demonstrated through time, is that people with no higher sense of purpose than the pursuit of material wealth and various forms of self-gratification are not particularly happy. But rather, they tend to drift into destructive patterns of thought, feeling and behavior. The pursuit of personal happiness and fulfillment without a principled belief in and regard for the sacred worth of others leaves the soul empty.

In the case of modernity, people have attempted, often with honest passion, to gloss over the emptiness of life, a life of self-serving, in many ways, but especially there has been the attempt to use two defective moral principles. Those moral principles are freedom and equality. It is not that these two moral principles have no real value when used as measures when securing a just or righteous society. They do have value. However they emerged as part of an earlier concept of the good life which guided the thinking and dreams of political, social and even spiritual reformers. Both of them were part of an ideal that focused on the dignity of the individual. But neither singly nor together are freedom and equality sufficient to either define or to secure personal dignity. Both freedom and equality require a context for meaning. For instance [we need to ask], freedom or free to do what, from what? Equal to whom, and in what way? Are we searching for freedom from noise? Are we searching for freedom from evil? Perhaps we are searching for freedom from moral restraint, or freedom from debt, or maybe we are looking for freedom from the

consequences of our own decisions. Perhaps it is freedom from responsibility and accountability. Or do we want freedom to do this or that, to live as we choose, to pursue happiness as we understand it, or to live wherever we want. What do we mean?

In the long history that forms our heritage the defining concern was freedom from governmental tyranny. That was the origin of this ideal. Spurred on by and [with] a particular interest in that was a governmentally or state imposed set of rules and regulations for worship. Freedom of religion was a cardinal tenet in the American experiment in self-governance. This was very different from and was never meant to be freedom from religion. Indeed, the notion of a freedom from religion was abhorrent to almost all of those who were engaged in the founding of this nation and even those who gave it a thought considered to be utter nonsense and foolishness.

In line with that general understanding of freedom as freedom from the power of the state along with a state religion imposed by the power of the state, two other principles were prized as needful for securing freedom. Those two principles were the rule of law and equality before the law. Beloved, the mere fact that a nation is governed by laws does not guarantee that the nation enjoys the rule of law rather than the rule of men. Two things need to be present if the rule of law is to replace the rule of men. What are those two things? They are these conditions: first there must be a standard of justice or right which serves as the measure of the laws made by men. Second, those who formulate and pass the laws must be equally subject to those laws. No man, not even the king or whoever is the supreme executive is above the law. This is what we hear when reading those stirring words of the Declaration of Independence, referencing “the laws of nature and of nature’s God.” Furthermore we read in the Declaration of Independence that all men are [created] equal and they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that the people form a government which is to pass laws and those laws are to secure those freedoms and rights. The laws of nature and of nature’s God: that is the standard according to which the laws are to be made and by which they are to be measured.

Neither of these two criteria is any longer the reality of life in the United States of America. It has been a hundred years since members of the Supreme Court said the Constitution needed to be seen and treated as what they termed a “living document” which has meant they could interpret it in whatever way they wished in order to accomplish what they in their own opinion considered best, an opinion which rules over all others and cannot be revoked except by a later ruling of the same court or an amendment to the Constitution. Further the Senate and the House both have passed laws from which they then excuse themselves by means of special arrangements for their own considerable benefit, Obamacare being the most recent. On a less lofty level but with direct relevance to the issue the lawyers and courts of America regularly ignore principles of justice, equity and right in favor of rulings based on the technicalities of the mass of laws and regulations which increasingly entangle our lives. As a nation that refuses to listen to God and has turned away from the wisdom of His word we are in the process of strangling ourselves as we pass an ever increasing number of laws and rules and regulations by which we seek to control the appetites and the desires which we have steadily liberated from all moral restraint because of the abandonment of God’s law. In this we have become like Israel, a people who turned away from the Lord. But just because Israel had turned away from the Lord did not mean that the Lord had turned away from Israel, nor has the Lord turned away from us. That is the context.

As we set out to hear what the Lord will say to us through the prophet Amos we must remember at all times that the United States is not Israel. That is, our nation as such is not the chosen people of God. Therefore the promises of God do not pertain to us as a nation. The people of God today are found in the church which Jesus established and is His body. For this reason no portion of the Old Testament speaks to us with the immediacy or directness of the New Testament, not even the Psalms or the great moral teaching of the prophets as we are going to look at shortly. We have always to translate or to filter these things written through the crowning revelation of the purposes of God which is given to us as the New Covenant in Christ's blood.

But this does not mean that we, the United States, as well as all the nations of the world bear no responsibility to accountability before God. We all do. God is not merely the Lord of the Covenant. He is also the Creator of all things and He is the Lord of all. All will answer to Him.

So now you should have your scriptures open to Amos. We see that Amos speaks to us because he spoke to a wealthy, self-satisfied, politically strong and religiously active society which was a power amongst the nations in its day. You need to know when you open the book of Amos and you read about Israel it is at the height of its power; it is wealthy; it is strong; it is militarily a powerful nation and has a tremendous amount of influence amongst all of its neighbors. They were doing exceedingly well by every worldly and materialistic standard. That is the context into which Amos is sent by God to speak to them. Despite its religiosity – the temples were constantly being attended to and the sacrifices were given; the religious life of Israel flourished during this time – but despite its religiosity it had turned away from the word of God. What are we like? We are a wealthy, we are self-satisfied – actually self-righteous would be a better term amongst the liberal elite that runs our nation, absolutely convinced they know they have the right answers, they know the right approach, they will handle the issues: that is why they think they can design and organize our lives including our diet, our healthcare and every other aspect of our lives for us. We are more religious than any other wealthy, technologically advanced nation in the world. The United States is still the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world. But not far beneath the surface there is pervasive evidence that increasingly breaks through that we are a nation that is sinking into moral confusion as well as contention. We are a nation rapidly losing the key virtues or character qualities which have produced our great wealth and power. Even more tragically and ironically we are scrapping the institutions and the principles which earlier defined and nurtured the freedoms which were the hallmark and the great advance of our nation amongst all others. I have said before when I stepped into the pulpit nearly forty years ago, I would not have dreamt that I would be preaching from a pulpit in a nation such as the United States is today. The change in our nation is so profound and so extreme that it is disorienting. Fortunately for people like me my eye is fixed on Jesus Christ. Therein is my comfort and therein is my strength. If all is swept away, that will not be, but the loss is immense.

Now to a considerable degree it was the same for the northern ten tribes, the kingdom of Samaria. After the rebellion against the house of David ruling from Mt. Zion or Jerusalem, the northern kingdom under Jeroboam altered some of the fundamental, basic tenets of the law of God by setting up two calf idols, one of them in Dan at the northern end of the kingdom, the other in Bethel, very close to Jerusalem at the southern end of the kingdom. They furthermore had rejected the Levitical priesthood. By doing this, by making those two moves, what the northern kingdom had done was basically to empty God's word of any authority because the king could change the rules whenever he wanted to. He who has the power to change the rules is in charge of the rules and is the ultimate authority. Oddly, perhaps, the northern kingdom considered themselves to be the people of God and the favored

children of Abraham. As such they were convinced that they enjoyed a privileged standing with God and that He would certainly bless them. They were not entirely wrong in thinking that way. If you turn to Amos 3:1, you will see that the prophet there makes this comment. He says, *“Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt.”* Ah, at that moment Amos has erased the distinction between the northern ten tribes and the southern tribes and he has scooped all the people of God into one great company and said, *“Thus saith the Lord!”* So the northern ten tribes, Israel or Samaria, were right that they were still the privileged people of God, but they were wrong in their understanding of what that privileged relationship meant. God sends Amos to correct their thinking about what it means to be the chosen people of God.

Hear again these opening verses from the prophet Amos.

(v. 1) *“The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.*

(v. 2) *“And he said: ‘The Lord roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem: the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.’*

(v. 3) *“Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron. (v. 4) So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael, and it shall devour the strongholds of Ben-hadad. (v. 5) I will break the gate-bar of Damascus, and cut off the inhabitants from the Valley of Aven, and him who holds the scepter from Beth-eden; and the people of Syria shall go into exile to Kit,’ says the Lord.*

(v. 6) *“Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they carried into exile a whole people to deliver them up to Edom. (v. 7) So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza, and it shall devour her strongholds. (v. 8) I will cut off the inhabitants from Ashdod, and him who holds the scepter from Ashkelon; I will turn my hand against Ekron, and the remnant of the Philistines shall perish,’ says the Lord God.*

(v. 9) *“Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four I will not revoke the punishment. Because they delivered up a whole people to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood. (v. 10) So I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre, and it shall devour her strongholds.’*

(v. 11) *“Thus says the Lord: For three transgression of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he pursued his brother with the sword and cast off all pity, and his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever. (v. 12) So I will send a fire upon Teman, and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.’*

(v. 13) *“Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of the Ammonites, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead, that they might enlarge their border. (v. 14) So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah, and it shall devour her strongholds, with*

shouting on the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind; (v. 15) and their king shall go into exile, he and his princes together,’ says the Lord.

(2:1) “Thus says the Lord: ‘For three transgression of Moab, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because he burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom. (2:2) So I will send a fire upon Moab, and it shall devour the strongholds of Kerioth, and Moab shall die amid uproar, amid shouting and the sound of the trumpet; (2:3) I will cut off the ruler from its midst, and will kill all its princes with him,’ says the Lord.

I will not go any further than that; I just wanted us to catch the full flavor and impact of these words that the Lord gave to Amos.

Very few any longer speak of or claim that the United State is the special or chosen people of God. But many still recognize that ours is a nation signally blessed by God and we tend to think of ourselves as being special in the eyes of God, particularly the church. But it is absolutely essential for us, as it was for Israel, to understand who is this God in whose eyes we think we are favored. What description or definition of God would the average self-professed Christian, let alone simply the average Christian, give in America? How would they go about describing Him? The same issue was at the heart of God’s contention with the people in Amos’ day. It is absolutely critical, it is necessary to have clarity regarding the character, power and purposes of God. For what we believe about His character, power and purposes will govern the way we worship, and the way we worship will profoundly the affect the way we live.

Today I am praying for my son. He and a good friend are stopping by a church in Redding called Bethel Church. Do any of you know of it? We did a little bit of research ahead of time. It is absolutely heretical and apostate. People come from all over to worship there: signs and wonders. I told my son, who with his friend is going to go to Glacier National Park and face off with grizzlies that have been sighted in the Park, that I am more worried about his day at Bethel than I am about the amount of time he might spend in Glacier.

Who is the God that we worship? How does God present Himself through Amos? I suspect that if people remember anything from Amos, there are two verses that I just suspect are the ones that usually come to mind; you may not [recall] where they come from, but you will recognize this. How many of us have seen cartoons with the guy standing on the edge of the street and he has a sign and it says, “Prepare to meet your God!” Well, that’s Amos. The other one, which is equally powerful and far more beautiful and deeper in its significance, is Amos 5:24, “*Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*” Are these a fair introduction to the God of Amos and his message?

Look with me again to Amos 1:2, and then stick something back there so we can get to 3:8 at the end of this message. “*The Lord roars from Zion and utters His voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.*” Just reading the verse you sense that there is something perhaps a little unsettling. But let’s look at it closely. We begin with the fact that He presents Himself as “Yahweh”. Remember that Amos is talking to Jews, so they know this stuff. This would be immediately apparent to them even in their apostate condition. He is Yahweh the God of the Covenant. Amos speaks for the Covenant God. That was profoundly

significant for Israel. Two events stand out in the formation of Israel as the people of God. The first was the call of Abraham. He was the Father of Israel as the father of a family, the great patriarch that stands at the head of the clans. Furthermore he was the great model of personal faith. The other great event was the call of Moses. Moses was called to be a great prophet and he was going to be the liberator and the lawgiver who would lead Israel out of Egypt and to the Promised Land and transform them from slaves into an independent nation. Moses' call is presented to us as an extended personal conversation between Moses and God recorded in Exodus 3 and 4. The heart of it is Exodus 3:13-17.

“Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’ And He said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, “The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise (pause and repetition for dramatic emphasis) that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to...a land flowing with milk and honey.”””

Ah! Theologians tend to focus on the specific meaning of the name “Yahweh”, which is a form of the Hebrew word for “to be”. It can be translated as “I am who or that I am.” Differently stated, “I am the one who is” or “I am the being One.” Equally significant for Israel, however, is the fuller definition of God's name given in the following verse: *“The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to...a land flowing with milk and honey.’”* I have observed and I promise: that is the essence of the covenant: I promise. I am the God who sees your distress, and I am the God who promises to get you out of that distress. I am the God who rescues from slavery, and I am the God who brings you close to Himself that you might be in the place of blessing. If we are the people who worship this God, we are the people who worship the God who saves. That is good news. Is that good news? He is the God who saves.

Now I want to look at the next word: Roar. It is a specific word. The word was used to describe the roar of a lion, specifically the roar that a lion makes at the moment of the attack. How many have heard a lion roar? Once only I was riding in an open air train through the wild animal park which is a part of the San Diego Zoo. We were safely up on the tracks, safely inside the metal box, and below us, unseen in the vegetation apparently was a lion, and he roared, and I had goose bumps and I shrank! And I said, “Let's go to the beach.” There is absolutely no exaggeration when I say that that roar was blood curdling. That is by design. The lion does not want to chase the impala; it would far rather the impala would be frozen in terror for a leisurely nibble!

There are no lions in Israel today, nor any place in the Mid-East. But in ancient days lions were everywhere. You might recall that Samson killed a lion. David killed a lion. You might know that the Assyrians used the lion as a symbol of strength attached to the royal house. King Solomon had 12 lions carved in ivory on [the steps up to] his throne. No one in Amos' day listening to him say, “The Covenant God who saves roars” would miss what was being said. What we are being told is that the God of the Covenant is roaring like a lion and He is roaring at the people of God. Could the God of the Covenant attack and devour the people of the Covenant?

Finally, the third thing to take note of is that God is a God of fire. This is not as immediately obvious to us on the surface, at least not immediately. The centrality of fire in the progressive self-revelation of God would have been known by the people of Israel. Just the mentioning of the top of Mount Carmel withering would have brought out a sense of the intense heat of the sun. But notice, if you will, the progressive repetition of references to fire in the portions which I have read [from Amos’ prophecy], which is one of the reasons why I read them. If you will, look at verse 4, “...I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael...”; verse 7, “So I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza...”; verse 10, “...I will send a fire upon the wall of Teman...” verse 12, “...I will send a fire upon the wall of Tyre...”; verse 14, “...So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah...”; 2:2, “So I will send a fire upon Moab...”; 2:5, “So I will send a fire upon Judah...” We do not normally associate fire coming from the mouth of a lion, from the mouth of a dragon, yes, but not from the mouth of a lion: strange image.

But the Jews would have understood that God is a God of fire. When God called Moses in the land of Midian, He called him from a burning bush. When God had gathered Israel out of Egypt, brought them to Mt. Sinai, on the top of that mountain was a huge blaze and the mountain was so terrifying that no one wanted to go close to it: fire! From the beginning of Exodus God had led Israel through the wilderness by a pillar of fire. Along the way two of Aaron’s sons decided to use “strange fire” in order worship and offer incense to God and we are told that from the altar of God fire came out and devoured both of them. When Solomon built the temple, in the temple was the ever-burning lamp of the holiness of the house of prayer. We also are the people of God, and we must not think that God will be less exacting of us than He was of Israel. In Hebrews 10:28-31 we read,

“Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay,’ And again, ‘the Lord will judge his people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The warning is given again **12:25-29**;

“See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

That is our God. If we worship Yahweh, the God Who is, we worship the God who combines perfect mercy and perfect justice, and that justice is expressed as wrath, for God hates sin. It is a package deal: we don’t get the grace without the justice.

So the reason I want to do a study of Amos is simply this: Amos 3:8, “*The lion has roared; [who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken;] who can but prophecy?*”

Let us pray: Father, peace and prosperity breed complacency. Gradually our sight is dimmed and we no longer recognize the realities of our condition or the nearness of the God we worship. We drift and we do not know how

far we have gone from the shores of the Promised Land out upon the sea where nothing remains. Call us back. Break our hearts. Call us back. Awaken our minds. Call us back. Pour Your purpose into our will that we might stand fast as the people of God. It is in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Questions for Understanding and Application:

1. Why are the moral principles of freedom and equality insufficient in themselves as guides for securing a righteous society which affirms the inherent dignity of every person?
2. How did the Founders of our nation view religion and its relationship with the state?
3. What is necessary for there to be the rule of law rather than men in a nation? Why is equality before the law so important?
4. What is happening to the rule of law in our nation and what are the contributing factors?
5. In what ways is the United States like Israel (Samaria) in the days of Amos?
6. What do most people in our country see as the dominant characteristics of God? What might be the relationship between a person’s picture of God, how they worship that God and how they live their daily lives?
7. As between God’s call and dealing with Abraham and Moses, which speaks most directly to your personal experience and which do you think had the greater impact in Israel’s life as a people?
8. Does the idea of God roaring as a lion attacking its prey seem troublesome or appropriate?
9. Do you see any “fires of judgment” burning in our nation?
10. Will expect our nation to be a “holy people”. Why or why not? By what standard do you think God will judge us as a nation?