

**Sunday, July 17, 2011**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – "Surely God Is In this Place."**

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Today we are introduced to Amos, one of the earliest prophets on record. Amos's name means "one bearing burdens." It is an apt description of the prophet who bears the weight of Israel's alienation from the God of Jacob who brought them out of Egypt.

Writing in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, BC we get a picture of a man who is despondent over the state of affairs in Northern Israel. At the time Amos writes, Israel has divided into North and South territories. It is a time of peace.

The previous threats from the Assyrian empire are behind them. The people are enjoying a prosperous time. Control of some of the major trading routes has brought substantial wealth to the Northern territories. The rich merchants were building palaces and summer houses. The Israelites, feeling confident and optimistic believe that God is acting in their best interest.

They worship God through feasts at the temples. In the words of one commentator, "the Israelites had domesticated God." Amos saw a distinct contrast between the God of Israel and the God that Israel was worshipping.

In his commentary on Amos, Hughell Fosbroke characterized it this way:

*"For Amos Yahweh was the great awe-inspiring deity of Israel's desert days who manifested his power again and again in the destructive phenomena of nature. He was the death-dealing storm God whose might was made known in the tempest that swept resistlessly over the face of the earth, whose voice could be heard in the crashing of the thunder, whose arm was laid bare in the lightning flash. A God whose claim on man's obedience was absolute."*

Amos believes in a God who is all-powerful;

controlling nature – both good and bad;

He believes in the God of history who brought the Israelites out of Egypt and entered into a covenant;

He believes in a God of Righteousness who is offended by the oppression and denial of justice to the poor and helpless.

Throughout the book Amos laments Israel's sinful behavior and conveys the Lord's disappointment.

The phrase, "Thus says the Lord" is repeated over and over, emphasizing that Amos is speaking for God.

Amos spends eight chapters enumerating the failings of the people and sounding the alarm for the coming judgment day.

He petitions God to spare the people from devastation and God relents.

It is only in the final, ninth chapter that Amos changes his tone and says that the Lord will rebuild the ruined cities and restore the fortunes of his chosen people.

There is some controversy among scholars as to whether or not this ninth chapter was added at a later time by editors.

It seems uncharacteristic for Amos to prophesize a happy ending for a people who have made God subordinate to their own interests.

Once again, as with the other prophets we have studied, we find a message of God disappointed in human behavior, but forgiving and redemptive in the end.

Amos' message to his people, and to us today, is that Israel was chosen by God, not for its own advantage, but as an instrument of God's purpose.

Amos shares with us his God-centered vision of life.

In his world, human life finds meaning only in total surrender to God.

Total surrender to God.

Not an easy undertaking, but one illustrated in the Genesis story heard earlier.

Jacob, a real scoundrel, is on the run.

He has coerced his brother to give up his birthright and then tricked his father into giving him a blessing that is not rightfully his.

His brother has had enough of his shenanigans and has threatened to kill him.

Jacob, in a dream, has an encounter with God.

God identifies himself as the same God that has communicated with Jacob's father, Isaac and grandfather Abraham.

God makes several promises to Jacob.

He promises land, descendants, blessings and presence.

The words of promise resound with us today:

*"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

There are several lessons for us to learn from this encounter.

First, you never know whom God is going to use to accomplish God's purpose.

Second, you never know where God is going to reveal himself. Anyplace can become sacred ground.

Third, everyone can change.

When we allow God into our lives we are transformed.

When we surrender control and stop trying to manipulate outcomes, we find ourselves on holy ground.

The God that Jacob comes to know is the God that Amos worships. The God of the Old Testament is not a punishing God, he is a God of covenant.

What God wants from us is for us to uphold our end of the covenant.  
Remember, the God who sends plagues and fires also sends wheat and rain.  
The God who brings death and destruction is also the God who brings life.  
The God who hates injustice is also the God who loves justice.  
The God who created us yearns to be in relationship with us.

Again, as with the earlier prophets, we are left with choices.

We are compelled to decide if we will be covenant partners or if we will try to domesticate God for our purposes.

A quick review of Amos' list of transgressions sounds alarmingly similar to our world news headlines today.

The first sin is the torture of prisoners – using wheat threshers to mutilate enemies;

The second is ethnic cleansing – sending entire conquered populations into exile;

The third is forgetting the covenant of kinship in times of conflict;

The fourth is brother warring with brother, perpetually maintaining anger;

Next comes the violation of pregnant women in times of war;

Next is the assassination of the King of Edom;

Next is not keeping the Lord's statutes and being led astray by lies;

Amos goes on and on condemning the pursuit of wealth, mistreatment of the poor, sexual impropriety, drinking, using resources inappropriately – you get the picture.

Again, as with the earlier prophets, we are faced with the dilemma of a human condition that seems to undermine our worship and love of God.

So what does it take to live a God-centered life?

It takes commitment, discipline, and love.

Reuben Job, retired bishop in the Methodist church, suggests that it takes “faith in God, desire for God's way, and a great love for God and God's will.”

He identifies listening as the first prerequisite for developing a God-centered life.

Listening to others, to self and to the voice of God.

He offers this prayer:

*Loving Creator, we place our lives into your hands with confidence in your love and fidelity. We know that you will lead us into your will and so we ask in confidence, do with us what you will and lead us this day in truth and righteousness We offer our prayers and our lives in the name of Jesus. Amen.*