

Breaking News: God's Heart is Breaking

Luke 19:41-42, Amos 5:21-24

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I am so old I can remember when “breaking news” was a phrase used only to interrupt regular programming with news about the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion or the 9/11 terrorist attacks or a raging fire headed your direction. In preparation for this sermon, I turned on my television and tuned in to a 24/7 news station. I left the sound off, and throughout the day I would look over at the screen. It was permanently captioned across the bottom with the words: Breaking News. Now everything is breaking news. It doesn't matter if the reporter is talking about the latest conversation with Dr. Fauci, insurrection at the Capitol or fashion at the inauguration.

Using the phrase “Breaking News” makes me feel as if there is about to be a report that will change the trajectory of all our lives. When I see or hear the words “Breaking News” I feel the need to stop whatever I am doing and sit down and listen. Which, of course, is why they do it. Fear sells. Fear makes us watch. Stopping whatever we are doing to watch makes us feel like we are doing something, when, truth be told, we're not.

Psychological studies are now being done on what the 24/7 news cycle of “breaking news” is doing to our mental health. We are being bombarded with the message that we are in imminent danger every second and our body can't help but react in a constant state of panic. Studies are showing an increase of anxiety and depression and substance abuse directly connected to one's consumption of news and social media. One psychologist has dubbed it “headline stress disorder”.

Some people have tried to fast from the news, but it is hard to do. Our friends fill us in all the time on anything we might have missed...actually, so do complete strangers. I was going for a walk last Fall when a stranger stopped me on the street and frantically began to tell me about all the stuff, he was reading online that had him completely ramped up. I don't want to fast from the news, but I desperately want to figure out where to find actual news.

Today Katie read powerfully to us today from the book of Amos. Amos had some breaking news, and he broke right into the middle worship to share it. Amos was an unknown... a herdsman and keeper of sycamore trees from a little village in the Southern Kingdom...a man without privilege, power, wealth or education. He traveled to the Northern Kingdom...to Bethel, the center of fervent religious worship in a royal sanctuary and he went during a feast day. Amos felt an unbridled compulsion to set up his soapbox in the middle of worship with breaking news from God. “Thus sayeth the Lord, ‘You are breaking my heart.’”

We have all heard poetic words from the Book of Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” Poetry has a way of conveying something with power that prose can’t touch in the same way. When we want to give a nod to social justice, we pull Amos’ words out of our back pockets. “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” We feel so proud of ourselves when we say it.

But when we just pull these words out of context, we miss the surrounding words of anger, frustration, condemnation. Words like:

*I will make the sun go down at noon,
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning,
and all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on all loins,
and baldness on every head;
I will make it like the mourning for an only son,
and the end of it like a bitter day.*

If you were trying to find something to watch on television and you are clicking the remote between channels and you happened upon Amos prophesying, I can guarantee you would keep on clicking by that stuff. His listeners at Bethel did not appreciate Amos’ breaking news. It was disturbing people who were trying to worship, after all. So, the head priest of the King told Amos to go home and never come back.

But that didn’t stop Amos. He had breaking news. God was unhappy and Amos needed to get that message out. So, he wrote it down...the first prophet to write down his breaking news. If the elite and powerful of this generation wouldn’t listen, maybe future generations would someday read his words.

He needed them to know what was making God unhappy...what was breaking God’s heart. The well-being of the market had become more important than the health of the people. Sound familiar? The system had become so unbalanced that the rich were eating off the tables of the poor. Sound familiar? Big religious centers were propped up by the money of the wealthy and poured out a comforting message of blessing and praise while so many were living a nightmare. Sound familiar? Nothing could stop Amos from trying to break into worship and declare God’s indictment.

It appears that God was most frustrated with the religious. Imagine Amos coming into this sanctuary during worship or into our Love Feast while we are washing each other’s feet and shouting:

I have breaking news from God’s own mouth
I despise your pious worship
I won’t accept your offerings to me
Your beautiful prayers and lovely music won’t bribe me,
They are just noise if you aren’t acting with justice and righteousness.
Justice and righteousness is what real worship looks like.

Justice – which means creating fairness and equality.

Righteousness –which means living in right relationship with others

Amos stood up on his soapbox back in 8th century BCE and we can hear his voice calling out to us today. Justice requires action. Justice is worship. This is not the image of a blindfolded woman holding a set of balances. This is a Victoria Falls spilling over 500 million liters of water per minute.

A year and a half ago, I was blessed to be in a microlight flying thousands of feet above Victoria Falls in Zambia. I began that flight terrified for myself and ended that flight in awe and wonder. It was beautiful. Even high above the falls I got wet from the spray. That is the image of justice I carry in my head. Justice roaring forth with unending force, spraying its power in all directions.

Justice means we advocate...we stand in the courts of justice and demand they live up to their names -- equality for those consistently stripped of rights. It means we produce fruit and that starts by recognizing our neighbor in everyone we see. It means we refuse to be diverted or stopped in our quest for freedom, safety, wholeness for all of God's beloved children. All of them. The requirement to act justly is unending. We can't sing about it on Sunday and then behave differently the other six days of the week or pretend we don't see injustice happening all around us. Our words become empty, our prayers disingenuous, our music painful to God's ear. Worship isn't an amazing choir. It isn't good preaching. It isn't a lovely sanctuary. Amos tells us that worship is when the people of God act in justice and love.

I want to be clear, while there is a personal indictment in Amos' words, he was preaching God's words to the nation. This is bigger than us writing checks to Heifer Project and Habitat for Humanity and then feeling morally righteous. This is putting our prophetic imagination and energy into dismantling the discrimination built into our very economic and legal systems. This is us demanding that we reverse the inequality in the system that makes Heifer Project and Habitat for Humanity necessary in the first place. This is us jumping up on the soap box on to preach to our fellow citizens and leaders on behalf of the powerless among us. This is us recognizing family in everyone and working to restore right relationship between all people...we are family to the nameless dead to Covid-19, to Ahmaud Arbery, killed because he was jogging while black and we are family to the father and son who believed they were righteous by gunning him down in the street. We have work to do....I mean we have worship to do.

Think about what it is that you can be doing this week to worship God the way God desires to be worshiped. How can you be part of the work of our nation to dismantle racism, advocate for fair housing, heal the polarization, change the system, love the neighbor you find easy to dismiss? Write me a text or an email this week and let me know what you plan to do...what you can do...how you would like to help the rest of us do the work of justice. How do you plan to truly worship God this week?

It will be beautiful music to God's ears. Amen.