

Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-24

Amos is one ticked-off prophet. He minces no words. The privileged people of Israel have been looking out for themselves, not for everybody, and there is rampant injustice. Judges assume the best of well-to-do people and assume that the poor are at fault. Peasants are required to pay more and more for the land they rent, until they are finally forced to sell themselves into slavery. Amos says that this complacency about injustice makes God roar like a lion, and when God roars, the pastures dry up and it's not good for anybody. But if the privileged will take an honest look at themselves and the consequences of their self-serving inactivity—"hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate" in Amos' words—then God may still be gracious to the descendants of Joseph.

Injustice is insidious. It's not necessarily enacted or imposed by men in black hats twirling their mustaches; the agents of injustice are more often nice people who just aren't giving it a lot of thought. Kathlyn James tells a haunting story about an African American woman named Mozella Dansby who walked into her job at the Georgia Power Company and shot two co-workers and then herself. It turns out that she had been passed over for promotion yet again, and while it was pretty clearly because of her race, she couldn't get any traction when she complained. She left a note in her purse that said,

"I think this was something that needed to be done. They didn't do me fair about the job and they had to be stopped. I know everyone is saying this goes on everywhere and always will. But I think this will give other supervisors and managers something to think about before someone else is done unfairly."<sup>i</sup>

"I know everyone is saying this goes on everywhere and always will." What drove Mozella Dansby to despair was that she could expect nothing to change. She saw no indignation at injustice, no movement to change things, no acknowledgement that it was not right for her to

be so trapped. Nice people just shrugged and went on with their lives, oblivious to her anguish. Evil is insidious.

Amos's listeners apparently think of themselves as good people who will be rewarded on "the day of the Lord." They look forward to it. But Amos says,

Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; <sup>19</sup>as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. <sup>20</sup>Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

You're not going to like it, because you're not on the side of the Lord, who built justice into the covenant on Mt. Sinai that defines who the people of Israel are. Amos is not subtle or pastoral, but I think he's desperate. He doesn't think Israel has the luxury of waiting till everybody feels like paying attention or gets into the Christmas spirit. People are suffering *now*. The Lord roars from Zion *now*.

If the Lord's roaring dries up the meadows, the imagery that Amos uses to call Israel to repentance is that of rushing water: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." Water is a necessity of life . . . as is justice. The antidote to Carmel's drought is people turning their attention to establish justice in their society. In fact, the way God has designed the world to work is for water to flow lavishly so everyone is fed, and for justice to flow just as freely so everyone thrives. When justice is denied, the earth dries up. And in fact, this is where those privileged people's privilege is at stake: when the earth dries up because of your negligence, you too are going to suffer. Your well-being actually rests on everyone's well-being. This of course is at the core of the way the prophets see geopolitics. In the case of Amos and Israel, it is no surprise when the Assyrians sweep in and destroy Israel a few years after his prophecies, because the society had rotted from the inside and was no

match for an adversary.

This idea of our well-being depending on everybody's well-being reminds me of Aaron Feuerstein of blessed memory, who died in Boston on Nov. 4 at the age of 95. Aaron Feuerstein is a pillar of my ethics curriculum, because he was a mensch. The *NYTimes*:

Mr. Feuerstein's company, Malden Mills, was by the mid-1990s among the last large textile companies in Massachusetts, which had seen its manufacturing employment numbers crater from 225,000 in the 1980s to about 25,000 a decade later.

Most other companies, faced with competition from lower-wage states and cheap imports, had either closed or moved production out of the state.

Malden Mills, located just outside the old mill city of Lawrence, was a shining exception: Not only did Mr. Feuerstein refuse to move, but he and his company prospered, thanks to its proprietary fabric Polartec, which it sold to clothing brands like Patagonia and L.L. Bean. In fact, 1995 was a banner year for the company, with sales up 10 percent to more than \$400 million.

Then, on the night of Dec. 11, 1995, a boiler in one of the factory's five hulking plants exploded. The shock wave knocked out the state-of-the-art sprinkler system Mr. Feuerstein had just installed, and 45-mile-an-hour winds blew the ensuing fire to three other buildings. The blaze burned for 16 hours, injuring more than 30 workers.

Three days later, most of the plant's 1,400 workers lined up to receive their paychecks, figuring it might be their last from Malden Mills. Mr. Feuerstein joined them. He handed out holiday bonuses and then announced an even greater gift: He would immediately reopen as much of the plant as he could, replace the buildings he had lost and continue to pay the idled workers for a month — a promise he later extended twice.

Working nonstop, he and his workers got the surviving building, the finishing plant, back in operation just one week later. Mr. Feuerstein bought an empty factory nearby to hold new equipment. By the first weeks of January, hundreds of his employees were back at work. And just 20 months later he opened a gleaming new \$130 million complex.

A fitness nut who rose at 5:30 every morning to jog, read scripture and memorize poetry, Mr. Feuerstein announced the reopening with a quotation from E.E. Cummings. "I thank you, God, for most this amazing day," he said, "I who have died am alive again today."<sup>ii</sup>

Malden Mills did not thrive after this. The rebuilding led to debt, which led to bankruptcy. After the bankruptcy, he was forced out, and finally, 20 years after the fire, the new owners closed the business. But Aaron Feuerstein was still a mensch, because he did his

very best to keep his employees employed, and they knew that they mattered to him. He ate in the company cafeteria and talked to staff. He offered no-interest loans for school, for those who wanted more education. Stuff happens, like bankruptcy, and not all our efforts work out, but it's amazing how survivable that can be when you know that *everybody* cares, *everybody* is trying to make things right. I think just that acknowledgment might have kept Mozella Dansby from despair.

“They all called him Mr. A.F.,” his son Raphael said in a phone interview. “If someone felt unfairly treated, his office door was always open.” [ibid.]

Aaron Feuerstein vocally opposed downsizing and layoffs in the 1990s, when an intense focus on profits and shareholder dividends made those practices the norm. It wasn't that he couldn't have made more money, but that the community would have suffered if he'd maximized profits. He saw his well-being as more connected to the well-being of the city of Lawrence, MA, than to his bottom line. Amos was probably first in line to greet him when he got to the pearly gates.

I've been remembering the student whom Ron invited to speak on Zoom about the Black Lives Matter work going on here on campus last year. I remember that her pain did not come from people being mean or hostile, but from people being oblivious, or not taking her seriously. She told us about “microaggressions,” things that people say or do, sometimes without realizing it, that reveal that what they see first about her is that she's Black and often that's all they see, that they think they know things about her because she's Black, that they have a script in their heads about her life that they haven't bothered to review or check because it's just not that important to them, and they know they're nice people. She'd look

paranoid and defensive if she pointed it out every time, so she doesn't, but it leaves her being expected to hold pain and not do anything about it. We wouldn't want that for our kids or grandkids.

If what we know about racism is not enough for us to understand why this student's lived experience is problematic, we probably need to at least do some reading. *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee is a good place to start, or *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson. We've always known that our well-being is intricately tied into the well-being of the rest of God's children. Knowing that in general must propel us to keep learning, since we are clearly not finished yet! Amos reminds us to keep focused on the good of all, so that life-giving waters flow freely, the way God intended.

God of all people,

Show us how to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an every-flowing stream. Create justice and righteousness in us, that all may rejoice in your blessings. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002591/that\\_you\\_may\\_live](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002591/that_you_may_live)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/05/business/aaron-feuerstein-dead.html>