

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“An Ever-flowing Stream” (Amos 5:18-24)
November 8, 2020
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Several summers ago I spent a day visiting civil rights sights in Alabama. I drove from the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma along US Highway 80 all the way to Montgomery. Of course, unlike Martin Luther King and the many Civil Rights workers who walked those 54 miles in 1965, I drove in my pickup. Once in Montgomery I visited what was then known as Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (now Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church) where Dr. King was pastor from 1954-1960 and was even allowed to stand for a moment in the pulpit from where he preached, which I will never forget.

I then visited the residence in Montgomery where Dr. King and his young family lived at that time. Our tour guide was a beautiful octogenarian, a parishioner while Dr. King was there who quipped, “If I knew he was going to be such a big deal I would have paid more attention to his sermons.” In that house we stood in the kitchen where he would stay up late at night smoking cigarettes and praying and pacing the floor and occasioning getting phone calls from those threatening to kill him and his family. We stood on the front porch where there is still an indentation on the floor from where someone bombed their home on January 30, 1956.

Later I visited the Legacy Museum that traces the awful history of enslavement and mass incarceration in our country—which left me sober, speechless, and teary eyed. Finally, I visited the Civil Rights Memorial where there is a beautiful granite fountain featuring the names of 41 people killed during Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King. Inscribed on the side of this fountain are these words from Dr. King’s electrifying “I Have a Dream Speech” from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963: “...until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Four months earlier Dr. King used the margins of discarded newspapers to write an open letter to clergy entitled, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in which he used this same phrase while responding to those who considered his Civil Rights efforts “too extreme”:

Was not Jesus an extremist in love? – “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice? – “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? – “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist? – “Here I stand; I can do no other so help me God.” Was not John Bunyan an extremist? – “I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a mockery of my conscience.” Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist? – “This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.” Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist? – “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” So the question is not whether we will be extremist, but what kind of extremists we will be? Will we be extremists for hate, or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice, or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?

“Until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream...”—this powerful phrase is from the Old Testament prophet Amos, who lived about seven and a half centuries before Christ. Although from the southern kingdom of Judah, Amos preached in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reigns of kings Jeroboam and Uzziah. On the surface this was a relatively peaceful time for Israel, but below the surface it was rife with corruption and utter neglect of God’s law. Although numbered among the so-called “Minor Prophets” there is nothing minor about Amos’ words in today’s passage:

Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the Lord: Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light; 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. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:18-24).

This is an intense passage. This not a scripture passage you will find on inspirational Christian calendars or coffee mugs complete with a picture of a butterfly or sunset. This a dark passage, literally. “Why do you want the day of the Lord?” Amos asks, “It is darkness, not light.” Then he emphasizes this even further, “Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” Then as if that were not enough, this passage gets even darker as God rebukes Israel in no uncertain terms, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.”

Why this harsh rebuke from God? Because God is not interested in religious games. God is not interested in playing church, or focusing on things that at the end of the day have little or nothing to do with people learning about or experiencing the actual gospel about how God actually loves actual people like you and me as we actually are, not as we or anyone else think we should be. Believe it or not God does not lose sleep over whether or not we use the right colored altar hangings every week, or whether or not we say “Alleluia” during Lent, or whether we decorate our house for Christmas before December 25, or, and this may make some of you very uncomfortable, even whether you are Episcopal or not.

Yes, by and large during the reigns of King Jeroboam and King Uzziah Israel was peaceful and prosperous, but that did not mean all was well, not at all. Because even in the midst of this peace and prosperity there were many people who were poor and marginalized and ignored and overlooked and being taken advantage of by the very same people who were the most religious, the most concerned about keeping all the religious festivals properly, the most concerned about adhering to all the proper religious scruples while utterly blind to what really mattered to God...justice and righteousness.

“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” Amos cried out to Israel, “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” No wonder Martin Luther King repeatedly echoed this phrase in his preaching. Like Amos he was crying out to people like you and me who can become so myopically focused and preoccupied with things that do not really mean much to God, rather than what does matter to God—sharing God’s love with the least, the last, and the lost.

You may be wondering if this whole sermon will be a guilt trip, or ready for me to go ahead and wrap it up. Well, this sermon like every sermon I preach is a gospel sermon, and a gospel sermon is never about guilt trips; a gospel sermon is always about grace. So where is the grace in this sermon?

Here it is...This passage from Amos points directly to Good Friday—the day of the Lord that was indeed darkness and not light, the day of the Lord that was indeed a day of gloom with no brightness in it. You see, on the cross Jesus took the judgement of God upon himself.

Scripture tells us that as Jesus suffered on the cross for the least and the last and the lost—as Jesus suffered on the cross for the poor and marginalized and ignored and overlooked and those being taken advantage of—as Jesus suffered on the cross for those who have suffered from racism—as Jesus suffered on the cross for people like you and me who can become focused on the wrong religious and miss the whole point of the gospel...and as Jesus suffered on the cross “from noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three o’clock in the afternoon” when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and a moment later died. That was the day of the Lord, the darkest day ever.

Scripture assures us that Jesus’ death on the cross on Good Friday took place to prove at the present time that God is righteous and that God justifies those who have faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:26).

What kind of extremist was Jesus? What kind of extremist *is* Jesus? Jesus was and is an extremist for righteousness, for justice and most of all for love. In other words, as the precious blood of Jesus Christ flowed down the cross, the justice of God and the righteousness of God and most of all the love of God flowed down for you...and it all still does because the blood of Christ is an ever-flowing stream. That is the gospel. That is how much God loves the least, the last, and the lost...that is how much God loves you.

In response, the question for us today is the question Martin Luther King asked in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”: “what kind of extremists we will be?”

Amen.