

Sermon, January 15, 2023

Amos 5:18-24

“Let Justice Roll Down Like Water”

I believe I have told you this before, but when I was a student intern in seminary I worked in a church in Hamden, CT. One Sunday I was preaching on this same text, and later during the Joys and Concerns a woman stood up and proceeded to berate me for insulting the organist. She clearly misinterpreted the text. Looking elsewhere in the scriptures we see that God does not despise music, nor does he dislike the fact that we gather here for worship.

The reading directs us see to priorities. It is good that we gather here to pray, to raise our voices in song, and to hear the Word. But it is also important that we understand that what we do in here is supposed to prepare us for what we do out there - and one of the things God calls us to do is advocate for justice in a world that can often be unjust.

A number of years ago I was attending a conference in Atlanta, Georgia called the Festival of Homiletics , in which we listened to some of the best preachers in the country, including James Forbes, Barbara Brown Taylor, and the great Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann. It was all very inspiring. But the greatest inspiration came during one of the breaks, when I got on the subway to go and visit Ebenezer Baptist Church - the home church of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Sitting in the sanctuary, looking down at the small, plain pulpit that he preached from, and listening to a recording of one of his sermons was deeply moving.

I began to think about that Dream he spoke of on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. There has been progress in race relations since then, but the Dream is far from fulfilled - and at times lately, it feels like it is slipping away - with an emboldened white supremacy raising its ugly head, with a continuation of mass incarceration of African Americans, with the rise of anti-Semitism both here and abroad, and with a sizable increase in violence towards Asian-Americans!

If justice is ever to truly roll down like waters, there is still much to be done - much that needs to change, and churches in this country cannot just turn and look the other way. As Dr.King believed, “...indifference to evil is eviler than evil itself”, and the church need not feel powerless for change. As he said in a sermon in 1959, “...the most powerful forces in the universe are not those forces of military might but those forces of spiritual might.”

As an example of that spiritual might he said in the same sermon, “...it is one of the strange ironies of the modern world that the greatest Christian of the twentieth century was not a member of the Christian church.” Or course, the person he was referring to was Mahatma

Gandhi, a Hindu who was greatly influenced by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and led his people to independence through the way of non-violent resistance. This, in turn, would influence Dr. King's approach to the Civil Rights movement. This is what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of turning the other cheek and not returning hate for hate. Returning hate for hate only perpetuates the hate, just as violence only provokes more violence. In the long run it is only love that can break the cycle of hatred and violence, leading to the possibility of peace, but it is essential to know that true peace requires the presence of justice - justice for all.

Dr. King is remembered as a great leader in the struggle for Civil Rights, but in the last few years of his life his focus broadened, recognizing that Civil Rights is one aspect of Human Rights, and he called out for an end to poverty, an end to war, and an end to economic injustice. This is what Amos was talking about when he spoke of letting justice roll down like water. Like water, justice cleanses and makes the world a better place in which to live! Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, we thank you for this day, and for gathering us together that we may feel your Holy Presence, and come to know your Word, embodied in your Son Jesus, who is your anointed one - the Christ. Help us as we look to him for guidance as we face the challenges of our time. May we learn from him the ways of unconditional love, and the spiritual force it brings as we strive to make this world a better place in which to live.

This morning we celebrate the birth and the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., and pray for the justice he sought and died for. Show us how we can bring an end to mindless hate, to set aside all prejudice, to lessen the violence that plagues this world, that peace, and justice, and love might reign today and in all of our tomorrows....Amen.