

Have you ever been to traffic court? Of course you haven't because you're a responsible driver. I have gotten a ticket once or twice in my life, and had to go to traffic court. It's a humiliating, degrading experience. You sit in a room full of strangers, then the judge calls your name (probably mispronouncing it if you have a weird name like I do). You approach this raised platform and the judge looks over your information, dispassionately glances at you, then hands out a verdict. You're summarily dismissed, and the judge has forgotten your name and what you look like before you've even left the courtroom.

That's what we think of when we think of judgment. Especially when we think of God as a judge, it's as this distant, cold deity who hands down rulings on us. No relationship. No care. No love.

But in the world of the Scriptures, there was no such thing as a courtroom. In your little village, the oldest men from each family formed a little council of elders called the City Gate. And these men were the judges. If you had a problem or got into trouble, they handed down your ruling. They judged you, but not dispassionately. Not without care.

Because these judges were fathers first. Judging was just something they had to do as a part of being parents. And like any good parent, they wanted what was best for their children. If they had to judge, to discipline, they did, but only as someone who wants to see the wayward child become better, more whole.

The traffic court judge couldn't care less if I walk out the door and speed again or run a stop sign. (Okay, that's a bit unfair. In an abstract way, he probably doesn't want me to be hurt or to hurt others.) That's not the same as when God judges me. God, my Father in Heaven who loves me, who wants me to be a part of his kingdom. Who wants to rescue me from this world of sin and death. I can trust God to judge me fairly, to judge me well.

So in this final month before Advent, we're going to listen to one of God's prophets, a man named Amos. Amos lived around 750 BC in the southern kingdom of Judah. God appointed him to go up to Israel to prophesy, to deliver a message from God. (This would be akin to God sending a Michigan fan down here to Ohio State territory.) [Map with Israel and Judah highlighted/outlined]

The prophets' job was to make God's people uncomfortable. We all have a tendency to get complacent in our lives, to go into autopilot and just sort of get by. The people of Israel back in 750 BC were no different. Amos begins like this:

This message was given to Amos, a shepherd from the town of Tekoa in Judah. He received this message in visions two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash, was king of Israel. This is what he saw and heard:

The LORD roars from his Temple on Mount Zion; his voice thunders from Jerusalem! Suddenly, the lush pastures of the shepherds dry up. All the grass on Mount Carmel withers and dies. -- Amos 1:1-2 (NLT)

God is a lion, roaring from Mount Zion. God is ferocious and scary (which isn't a picture of God we often consider, unless we're reading the Chronicles of Narnia). We don't like to think of God as a judge – in fact, it's precisely this image of God as a judge that has driven many of us from the Church at some point in our lives.

And if we're not careful, we can hear Amos' words in this cruel, dispassionate voice. But let's remember as Amos speaks to us that we're hearing the voice of our Father in Heaven, who loves us and wants our best. Let's remember that for a parent, judgment and discipline are always about restoration and redemption.

We all have a tendency to compare ourselves to the people around us. And especially in the Church, this can make us feel better about the rough places in our lives. We say, Sure I need to get my schedule under control, but I'm not as bad as him. Okay, I have a tendency to gossip. But I'm not as bad as she is. I really need to be kinder with my words, but have you heard him? We see the people around us and we think, Well. It could be a lot worse. I suppose I'm good enough.

But according to Amos, "not bad" is not good enough. According to Amos, our standard for our lives isn't what we see around us, but what God calls us to be. That's a tough pill to swallow, so Amos comes at us sideways. He begins his prophecy with oracles against the nations surrounding Israel. Oracles are predictions of doom, and Amos delivers seven, one to each of the nations around Israel [**Highlight the names of the seven nations**]. Each of the oracles followed a similar pattern. Take a look at the first few and you'll get the feel of Amos' introduction:

This is what the LORD says: "The people of Damascus have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They beat down my people in Gilead as grain is threshed with iron sledges. So I will send down fire on King Hazael's palace, and the fortresses of King Ben-hadad will be destroyed. I will break down the gates of Damascus and slaughter the people in the valley of Aven. I will destroy the ruler in Beth-eden, and the people of Aram will go as captives to Kir," says the LORD.

This is what the LORD says: "The people of Gaza have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They sent whole villages into exile, selling them as slaves to Edom. So I will send down fire on the walls of Gaza, and all its fortresses will be destroyed. I will slaughter the people of Ashdod and destroy the king of Ashkelon. Then I will turn to attack Ekron, and the few Philistines still left will be killed," says the Sovereign LORD.

**This is what the LORD says: "The people of Tyre have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They broke their treaty of brotherhood with Israel, selling whole villages as slaves to Edom. So I will send down fire on the walls of Tyre, and all its fortresses will be destroyed."
-- Amos 1:3-10 (NLT)**

And through the rest of chapter 1 and 2, Amos delivers oracles of doom against all the nations surrounding Israel, including Judah, which was Amos' own country and Israel's main rival (or possibly frenemy) to the South. It'd be like someone storming in here today wearing a Michigan jersey, marching up on stage and declaring oracles of doom against the Big 10 teams that surround us here in Ohio. He'd start off "The Golden Gophers have sinned again and again..., The Spartans have sinned again and again..., Penn State has sinned again and again... The Cornhuskers have sinned again and again..." and so on and so on, and all the Buckeyes are leaning forward, maybe getting a little excited, and then finally, he concludes by saying, "But let me tell you who's really bad. Those Wolverines up at Michigan!" And everyone would erupt into applause!

Amos is clearly getting Israel on his side. He knows he's an outsider, a foreigner. And he's coming to deliver a message from God to this people that's not his people. So he begins with oracles of judgment against the other nations. He talks about how They, Them, Those People, the Others, are sinning.

And the thing is, Amos is right. The sins he lists are actual, real sins. They are so egregious that anyone can look at them and know they're wrong. We all agree that the political campaign ads have gone from just being annoying to downright sinful. The ads are way past disagreeing to demonizing and vilifying. When we talk about Human Trafficking, no one stands up and says, What's the big deal? I think selling another person into slavery is totally cool! Or the dictators in the Middle East who've been cast down during the Arab Spring. No one is saying, Eh, Mubarak. He was actually a really nice guy. Qaddafi? Total sweetheart. Definitely should've stayed in power. Anyone who learns about the children forced to be soldiers in Sudan is horrified and disgusted.

So were that Michigan prophet to come among us and rail against the evils of what happened at Penn State, no one would shout him down. Because we all agree that what happened to those kids was wrong. It's not up for debate.

Amos' original audience would've had the same reactions, and it all culminated in Amos' attack on Judah (our equivalent of Michigan). Or so they thought. See, Amos delivered seven oracles against seven nations. And in the Scriptures, the number seven means finished or completed (like seven days of the week). So when the more astute listeners were counting off the nations, and archrival Judah is number 7, they would've all sighed contentedly and nodded along.

But Amos wasn't done. He goes on, in 2:6

This is what the LORD says: "The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They sell honorable people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals. They trample helpless people in the dust and shove the oppressed out of the way. Both father and son sleep with the same woman, corrupting my holy name. At their religious festivals, they lounge in clothing their debtors put up as security. In the house of their god, they drink wine bought with unjust fines. -- Amos 2:6-8 (NLT)

It's like that Michigan prophet got us all on his side, then flipped it on us: But YOU, Buckeyes, you're the worst of the lot! In Amos' world, the effect was even stronger. After railing against all these pagan nations surrounding him, Amos turns to Israel and Judah, God's people, and says, Here's the deal, guys:

You think you're on God's side. You think that you're God's special people, God's chosen nation. But the reality is, you're just another pagan nation. You're no different from the godless people all around you.

Could that be true of us? Could we really be no better off than human traffickers and dictators and politicians? Could Yahweh the Lion be roaring at us, too?

To answer that, we need to figure out *why* God is angry at Israel, then ask if what was true about Israel is true about us.

Israel was God's special, chosen people. Back when they first made their covenant with God, at the foot of Mt. Sinai after God freed them from Egypt, God promised them this:

Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation. -- Exodus 19:5-6 (NLT)

As Yahweh's chosen people, Israel has full access to God's Way. Yahweh has specially revealed what kind of God he is to Israel, and Israel's original mission was to be not nobles, but ambassadors. But the Torah wasn't some kind of secret decoder ring that made them insiders in an exclusive club. It was a call. A job description. An invitation to join in God's rescue mission. Israel was expected to model God's light to all these pagan nations around them. That's what a priest does - they mediate between God and the people. But Israel was supposed to be a whole kingdom of priests!

Israel knew that the whole world belongs to God, that every nation, ever people everywhere is accountable to God. That's not how the other nations thought. Each nation had its own set of gods, its own tribal pantheon. Some worshiped Ba'al. Some worshiped Chemosh or Molech or Marduk. And Israel worshiped Yahweh. And, for the most part, as long as they weren't fighting with someone, each nation was content to let everyone else worship whomever they wanted. There wasn't much evangelism happening in the Ancient Near East.

But Israel had these Scriptures that made these claims about Yahweh: that he created the whole world. And as creator, his Way, his Law, his Torah, was actually *the* way. That - whether these nations acknowledged it or not, Yahweh is the king not only of Israel, but of the world. Yahweh, the God of Israel is sovereign over all nations, and all nations, all peoples, will be held accountable to Yahweh.

During Amos' time, instead of being that kingdom of priests, instead of modeling God's way to the pagan nations around them, Israel is living a life of indulgence and decadence. They could've argued that they weren't as bad as the people around them. They could've said, See? We're not so bad!

But God's people are transgressing God's revealed will. Israel's sins are *specifically* forbidden in the Scriptures. They're oppressing the poor, exploiting those who have less than they do. Sexual sin runs rampant, and worst of all, they're using religion to make it all okay. They're actually bringing all of this into their religious celebrations.

Instead of being priests to the world around them, Israel looks like the world. They're darkness in the midst of darkness. This is why God is so angry: Israel should know better. Amos goes on to warn them:

Listen to this message that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel and Judah-- against the entire family I rescued from Egypt: "From among all the families on the earth, I have been intimate with you alone. That is why I must punish you for all your sins." -- Amos 3:1-2 (NLT)

Israel! Judah! Of all the nations of the world, of all the peoples, all the families, *you were the only one I made a covenant with*. The terminology is actually marital - I have been intimate with you and you alone.

But you didn't remain faithful to me. Of all the nations, all the peoples of the world, you should've known better. Of course the pagans don't keep my Way. They don't know my Way. How could they? YOU were supposed to show them! You didn't, so they're being punished for breaking the natural law, the obvious stuff. But you? You know better! You have a greater responsibility!

So what about us? We could look at ourselves and say, what America does isn't as bad as Sudan. Or Iran. Or North Korea. But God's problem is that the other nations were never our standard.

In the Church, we're not called just to be better than dictators and politicians. We're called to be like Jesus.

There's always a crazier soccer mom than you. There's always a dad who is home less. There's always someone who spends less time with God than you. Someone who's more disrespectful to their parents. Always someone who treats their spouse worse. Always someone who's less honest.

But our standard isn't them! God says to us, You know better! Of all the peoples in the world, I have a relationship with *you*! Of everyone in the world, you *should be* better! I have shown you my way. I have revealed my will to you. Of course the pagans are going to act like pagans! They don't know my Way! But *you do*! So *why are you acting like pagans?!*

And God says, I won't let this go on forever. My children will not make a mockery of me forever. I am patient, I am kind and loving. I am slow to anger, but I do get angry. My work, my rescue mission is too important. If you won't repent, if you won't return to me, be my people for real, I will send my judgment upon you.

We have the same responsibility to the world Israel had. Because the truth is God created the world and God is king. Whether we or they choose to acknowledge it or not. The truth is, God's Way leads to life and all else leads to Death. Whether we or they choose to acknowledge it or not. And as God's chosen people, we are called to be ambassadors of that truth. To shine the light of God's truth into the world.

To show the world that God's Way is better. Here's how Jesus says it in Matthew 5:

You are the light of the world-- like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father. -- Matthew 5:14-16 (NLT)

Notice Jesus didn't say, You are the megaphone of the world -- like 5.1 surround sound on a hilltop that cannot be silenced. Jesus calls us light. And light is *seen*, not heard. We are to point people to God first with our lives, not our mouths. It's easy to talk. It's much harder to walk. It's easy to tell everyone that God's Way is better. It's much harder to *show* everyone that God's Way is better. It's easy to tell Them they're sinners. It's much harder to live a holy, righteous life that *shows* Them that their path is leading to Death.

But to live that sort of life, we have to do more than just look a little better than the world around us. Our lives must look like Jesus.

So how do we do that? What's the first step to showing instead of telling the world who God is? Later in the Sermon, Jesus says this:

Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged. Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye. -- Matthew 7:1-5 (NLT)

If you want to show the world that God's way is better, it starts right here [**tap heart**]. It starts with me considering my sin the biggest deal. I have to examine my own heart seriously. I have to consider whatever is inside me, however I'm transgressing, straying from God's Way to be the most important thing. That whatever Sin I find in the world, it's a speck compared to the plank I have in my life.

The Lion of Judah is roaring from Mt. Zion. Judgment is coming. We here know better. And it's time to start living out the Gospel, not just giving it lip-service.

What is the log in your eye? Maybe you're an abuser. You take and take, hurt those closest to you (physically, mentally, emotionally). You manipulate others to get what you want. You need to repent, because the Lion of Judah is roaring.

Maybe you're a slave to lust. You're in an adulterous relationship, or addicted to pornography. You need to repent, because the Lion of Judah is roaring.

Maybe you don't have any margin in your life. You're so busy that you're absent from your family and you don't have any meaningful community with brothers and sisters here. You need to repent because the Lion of Judah is roaring.

Maybe you're selfish - you take and take and don't know how to be generous with your time, your money, your possessions. You need to repent because the Lion of Judah is roaring.

Maybe you're so caught up in this election that you think the fate of this nation rests on who gets the vote on Tuesday, rather than in the hands of the One who controls the fates of all nations, who appoints leaders and brings kings down from their thrones. You need to repent because the Lion of Judah is roaring.

Maybe you don't even know God's Way very well because you do nothing to learn God's story. You don't pray, don't study the scriptures, don't serve. Your only contact with God is the brief hour we're gathered here on Sunday. You need to repent, because the Lion of Judah is roaring.

Brothers and sisters, the nation of Israel didn't listen to Amos. They persisted in their sins, and only a generation later, in 722 BC, Israel was destroyed forever by the Empire of Assyria. The Lion roared and they chose to ignore God, to remain in their comfortable, easy, false religiosity.

Let's not repeat their mistake. Brothers and sisters, let's listen to Amos. We must take his warning seriously. God is calling us to be his people, to be the light of the world. God *wants* this for us, but there is a limit to his patience. There are many in the church who have been fed such a distorted picture of God that they don't believe this is true. But Amos tells us differently—God runs out of patience. God's mission to rescue the world is too important to allow us to waste his time forever. God will not continue to let us bear false images of him to the world indefinitely.

We are the presence of God in the world. We are God's revealed will. And when we don't live up to that, when we don't embody that, there are consequences. God *will* have a people in this world that will be a light on a hill pointing the way back to God. And we can be that. But if we choose not to be, we invite God's judgment on our lives.

The beauty of prophecy is that if you're hearing it, it's not too late. If you're hearing Amos' words, you still have time to change. God is ready and willing to respond to us when we repent, when we return to him. The Holy Spirit is working within us even now to begin the steps toward transformation.

But we must step forward. We must respond to the Word of God given in his prophet Amos.

Examine

This is heavy stuff. It's never fun to examine our own hearts, to change the habits and patterns we're comfortable with. But we want to be God's light to the world around us. So let's take some space here at the end of our time together to consider what that might look like.

1. How in the past week have I shown God's light to the world?
2. How in the past week have I born a false image of God to the world?
3. What do I need to stop doing this week to bear God's image more fully?
4. What do I need to start doing this week to bear God's image more fully?

[Prayer]

We are not in this journey alone. God is calling us to be light, and the Holy Spirit is working in us to transform us. So even though today is heavy, it's also hopeful. And we believe that Jesus' Good News applies to each of us right now. So let's sing this last song together as an affirmation of hope. Let's confess that even now God is rescuing us from our hypocrisy, our sin, our death, and bringing us into truth, into life, into light!