

Last week we began exploring the prophet Amos' words to God's people. Amos pictures God as a lion standing in the Temple and roaring. Amos' message is one of judgment on God's people, which means it applies not only to the ancient Israelites, but to us too, to all of us who would follow Jesus. And we remembered that Amos' original audience didn't listen to him, they didn't heed his warnings. So it was only a generation later they were destroyed. We want to be different from them. We want to be faithful to God, to be a part of a church that endures. We want our efforts to have eternal implications.

So last week, we listened as he condemned God's people for being no different from the nations around them. God's people are supposed to be a light to the world, a people who shows the world the way of God, but they weren't being that at all. It didn't matter that they weren't quite as bad as everyone else. It matters that they weren't being who they were called to be.

Continuing in that vein, today, we're going to talk about today. Sunday. The day we've all gathered to worship. This is a room full of brothers and sisters, full of people who are part of God's people, God's kingdom. And in addition to those who're followers, we have many too who are curious. Who are trying to figure out this religion stuff, checking out Christianity, trying to decide if Jesus is worth all the hype. Some of us have had particularly excellent weeks. Some of us are in the midst of the worst times of our lives. A lot of us are just having average, normal weeks. But most all of us have come here looking for something. We want to be filled.

Maybe you've come for encouragement and inspiration. Maybe you've come for forgiveness or healing. Maybe you're here for answers and certainty. Maybe you're here out of obligation or to make someone happy. Whatever you're looking for, if you're like most of us, you're here to get something. We look to Sunday to energize our week. We come for music or prayer or teaching or fellowship and that fills us up so we can go back out into the week.

But there's a big problem you already know about if you've been in Church very long at all: what you get today isn't going to sustain you through your week. Even if you make it to this gathering every Sunday every week, what happens in here doesn't keep you very full. It lasts you a few days, but way before the next Sunday gets here, your basket is empty and you're feeling drained.

So you end up complaining (we all do it). If the music isn't up to snuff this week, or if it's been too long since we sang my favorite songs, I get grumpy. If I didn't connect to the sermon this week (or if the speaker isn't the person I like best), I complain. And in the Church, there's this nice, socially acceptable way of complaining. If you've been a part of any church very long you already know this. If you're new to church, here's what you say, "I just don't feel like I'm getting fed."

That's Church-code for "I didn't like it," or "It's not meeting my needs." And let's not pretend that anyone who says "I'm not being fed" is a horrible person. The reality is we live in a fallen world. It's tough out there. It's especially tough to follow Jesus. We pastors, we people who program this weekend worship gathering, we're in Church seven days a week. But everyone else is out there, in the world, on the front lines so-to-speak.

You *need* sustenance, nourishment, to make it through. To be that light in darkness. So that feeling of lack, that empty basket that Sunday doesn't fill, it's a legitimate feeling. It's real.

We don't *want* to be consumers who complain about our Church body. We *do* want to be transformed, to have enough in our baskets not just to sustain us throughout the week, but to overflow. We want rich, thriving lives that shine brightly in our homes, our work spaces, among our friends.

So what's the problem?

Thankfully (for us), our actual problem is the same as Israel's in Amos' time: we misunderstand the purpose of the weekend worship, of this space we're gathered in right now. So let's listen to Amos, let him set us straight and discuss how we respond to his counsel.

In Chapter 5, Amos describes Israel's worship. And, to be frank, it's not pretty. Let's read it together then I want to modernize it a little bit. Beginning in 21, Amos delivers God's words:

*I hate all your show and pretense-- the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings. Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. -- Amos 5:21-23 (NLT)*

God says, You have all these religious holidays, all these Sabbath gatherings. You bring me all these offerings and they stink. You sing all these songs, and it's just noise. Get rid of it!

Imagine that someone came in here right now and said, Listen to what God has to say: All your songs are making my ears bleed, and it has nothing to do with how well you sing. Keep your stupid money. If I have to hear you read one more scripture, it'll be too soon. I can't stand the thought of sitting through another sermon... blah blah blah. A bunch of empty, useless words. Just quit. Knock it all off.

What could make God say this about our worship? We need to know because we want to know if that's how God feels about what we're doing here. We want to know if that sense of inadequacy we feel about our worship, that lack of transformation is a reflection of how God feels about our worship. Maybe we're not crazy. Maybe there actually *is* something wrong.

The reason our worship feels inadequate is because it *is* inadequate. And God's as frustrated with it as we are.

That's really good news. Because it means we can change. We can be better. We can do better. If our worship is anything like what the Israelites were doing, then we have nowhere to go but up!

So what was their problem? And what does that tell us about our problem? Check out what God goes on to tell them:

*But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You shall take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves; therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus, says the LORD, whose name is the God of Heaven's Armies. -- Amos 5:24-27 (NRS)*

The problem with Israel's worship is the same as what we saw last week: God's people are not living justly. They're exploiting people around them. They're not actually enacting God's law.

So God tells them something *meant* to be shocking: God says, Take all your weekend worship stuff - your songs, your prayers your offerings - get it all away and instead bring me justice. Let it roll down like waters.

God is posing a question for us: is the only difference between us gathered here and the rest of the world the fact that we're gathered here? Is the only difference between us and everyone else what we do with an hour or so of our time once a week?

That was the only difference between Israel and the nations around them. Rather than being a light to the world, they just looked like everyone else. Their day-to-day lives didn't *look* like God's people. So God said, You know what I'd really like? More than worship songs? More than prayers? More than offerings? I'd like *obedience*. I'd like a people that looks like my people.

Somehow, we got it in our heads that God wants our worship. That God *needs* our worship. Almost like worship is a consumer transaction. We come here empty. We give God worship - we sing songs and give offerings and listen to sermons. And in return, God fills up our baskets. We feel better, we feel more spiritual. We use what we got here to get by during the week. We give God worship, God gives us blessing. It's give and take. It's fundamentally a consumer-mentality.

That's the kind of world we live in, so it's no surprise we start to think of our relationship with God in those terms. That's what happened to Israel, too.

The nations around Israel worshiped gods that were essentially fertility gods. All those nations Amos called out in chapter 1 worshiped gods that depended on the worship of their people. Ba'al and Chemosh and Molech needed offerings to survive. The thinking went that when you came to worship, you brought an offering - grain or animal - and you burned it. The smoke went up to the gods, and they were fed by the offering. If your offering was good, the god was sated, satisfied. And in return, you got the god's favor in the form of rain for your crops, health for your livestock, children for your family. Fertility.

The pagan gods needed you and you need them. So you gave the god worship. The god gave you fertility. Give and take. Exchange. Pagan worship, idol worship *was* transactional.

But that's not the kind of god Yahweh is. From the beginning, the Scriptures reveal that Yahweh is the creator of the whole world, and that Yahweh doesn't need us. That's what Yahweh says through Amos at the end of chapter 5:

**Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? -- Amos 5:25**

It's a rhetorical question, and the answer is, No. When God freed the Israelites from Egypt, they were former slaves. They didn't have anything. And in the wilderness between Egypt and the Promised Land, they had nothing. At all. Nothing to bring God as an offering. They were nomads. Anything they had, God gave them.

So when they came to worship, when they gave God offerings, they weren't giving God anything God didn't already have. That's the big difference between Yahweh and all the pagan gods around them: God doesn't *need* us or our worship.

But the Israelites were treating Yahweh like he was a pagan God. They were coming to worship, then going on about their lives, assuming that because they'd brought in some sacrifices, God would bless them.

And God says, You guys don't get it. If you treat worship like that, you're totally missing the point. Worship isn't about doing something for me. It's not about exchanging worship for blessing. You're caught in this false picture of what happens when we worship. And as long as you're caught in that way of thinking, you can't be transformed. You can't be light in the world.

Worship isn't for God. Worship is for us. But not in some kind of exchange-y, transactional way. We're not trading worship for blessing. Worship shouldn't feed us. Worship should transform us.

Worship is actually the process of declaring that God is king. Anything we do that reminds us who God is, and who we are in relation to God is worship. So Israel's problem was that they were coming in here one day per week and saying that God is king. They were singing songs about God being king and praying prayers to God as king and asking for God the king's help. Saying "the whole world is the Lord's!" and all that.

But then they'd leave, and they didn't *live* like God is really king. They didn't keep God's laws. They didn't live the way God had commanded them to.

That's why God said, "Do you think that what I want is songs and prayers and sacrifices? I don't need that crap! That's all for *you*! It's to remind you that I am king and you're my people and that your life outside of this space should reflect that!"

When God isn't king out there, what we do in here doesn't matter. When God isn't king out there, God isn't really king in here.

We have that same struggle today in the Church, don't we? We have all our 'God is Great' songs and 'We love you God' songs and even 'God is King' songs. We read Scriptures that affirm God runs the world and we are subject to God's rule. We pray "Your *kingdom* come and your will be done here on Earth as it is in Heaven."

But then we leave this place and we end up living more like citizens of the world than like God's subjects. We don't protect time, ordering our days with prayer and our weeks with Sabbath - instead we're busy busy busy, our calendars so full we don't have any space to stop and listen for our King's voice. We don't manage our finances faithfully so that we can be generous givers the way our King is generous. We consume the world's stories (through TV, movies, books, magazines) than we spend in the Scriptures, learning our King's story.

We don't live in such a way that anyone would have any idea that we have a different king than they do. That we live our lives according to a different ethic. Mostly what we do is come together once a week, declare God is king, then go out and live cultural, American suburban lives. We don't get the tension, the irony that creates.

Peter Rollins tells a story about a pastor who was awakened late one night by a knocking on her door. She answers to find one of her parishioners, who's obviously upset. Pastor!, he exclaims. We have to help! The man goes on to recount the story of a family he knows: the husband's just been laid off from his job. The wife had already quit her job to stay home with their small children and to take care of her mother, who's not been doing well. They're a good family, and the husband and wife are both hard workers. They can't pay their rent, and their landlord won't give them any more time to come up with the money.

"Can't we do something for them?" the man asks? "They're such good people. I know them well, and I just believe this is something the Church can do for them!"

The pastor is moved by his compassion and she says, Of course, of course. Let's start making some calls. How do you know the family, anyway?

The man replies, without missing a beat. "Oh, I'm their landlord."

We're both amused and a bit disgusted by that story. Because we recognize the irony of the landlord's hypocrisy. He's somehow managed to so separate his faith from his life that the two don't have anything to do with each other. We can see that even though when he worships, he's declaring God to be king, even though he clearly knows what God calls God's people to do, he doesn't apply that to the rest of his life. For him, God is only king on Sundays.

And when God isn't king out there, what he does in here doesn't matter.

Let's all admit that we can see a bit of that Landlord in ourselves. We're not as hypocritical as he is. But we can let that story shed some light on our souls. We can let it point out what hypocrisy we do possess.

Because if we can do that, we can begin to overcome that hypocrisy. We can live lives that declare God to be king every day of the week, not just on Sundays. We can begin to worship in ways that are transformative.

Instead of looking to Sunday to fill up our basket, to get us through the week, we can look for ways to fill up every day. Instead of wondering, What's God's will for my life?, we can embrace the clear teachings of the Scriptures. We can know that we are called to be like Jesus, to model God's love to everyone around us. To work for justice. To love mercy. To live humbly.

Remember: worship is reminding ourselves who God is. So when we read the Scriptures and remember how God is our king, we're filling up our basket. When we pray, we acknowledge that God is our king and we need him. When we keep a Sabbath, when we carve out time in our week to just *be* with the people we love - our parents, kids, friends, when we enjoy existing instead of producing, we remember that God created us for peace, not toil. When we serve someone, we remember that God calls us to give ourselves the way Jesus did for us. When we fast, we remember that physical stuff can never fulfill us because we are only whole in God's kingdom.

And so on and so on and so on. You can see, can't you, how easily we can fill ourselves throughout the week? That we don't actually have to wait for Sunday to be filled spiritually. That in fact, if we

are intentional throughout the week to worship, to remember who God is, by the time we show up on Sunday, we have far more than if we only got filled on Sunday.

Now, we can actually share with those around us. Our lives are overflowing with God's grace, with God's provision. Now the weekend worship isn't about feeding me, about filling me up. It's about celebrating! I come ready to share the ongoing transformation God is doing in my life every day. I can share and share and share, give and give and I'm not worried about running out because I'll be filling back up every day. My worship is constant, continual. I am *constantly* remembering that God is king. That I am God's child, God's subject. I'm continually practicing looking more like Jesus.

Monday-Saturday, I'm enacting justice. I'm showing mercy. I'm living humbly. That's when my Sunday worship is pleasing to God. When what I'm saying and singing and praying in here matching what I'm living out there.

When God is king out there, what we do in here matters.

Near the end of his encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus has this exchange:

"Sir," the woman said, "you must be a prophet. So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?"

She's asking the "Feed Me" questions: Who's got it right? Which denomination is the right one? Which building is the right place? What's God's favorite style of architecture? Is it traditional hymn or contemporary music?

Jesus replied, "Believe me, dear woman, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem... the time is coming-- indeed it's here now-- when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." -- John 4:19-24 (NLT)

Jesus echoes what we heard from Amos: It's not about that. It doesn't matter if you come to this building and pray and sing and all that. What matters is worshiping in spirit and truth. What matters is being transformed - unlike that landlord whose worship and life were separate, at odds with each other. God desires a people who are whole, consistent, integrated in all aspects of our lives.

If God isn't our king out there, then we're wasting our time in here. If I'm not worshiping God throughout the week, my songs are noise. If I'm not protecting time with my family, drawing healthy boundaries around my work, then my prayers stink. If I'm not generous with everything God has generously given me, then it doesn't matter how much I put in the offering plate. It's worthless. If I'm not patient and kind and slow to anger and trusting and loving, if I'm not choosing right over wrong every day, if I'm not living like God is king out there, then when I come in here and declare I believe God is king, I'm just a joke.

And I don't want to be a joke. You don't either. We want our prayers to matter. We want our worship songs to be true. We don't want to be people who just hear the Word and don't do what we hear. We want God to be able to come into our midst and be happy with us. We want to be a light, to

show people what it looks like when God is king. We want God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done here in our midst the way it is in Heaven.

You should've received an index card when you came in. If you didn't, grab an envelope from a pew or stick up your hand and we can get you one.

We're going to end our time together with a chance for each of us to examine ourselves, our lives. During that space, write on your index card ways that you can be filling up your basket throughout the week.

What we've experienced here together today isn't going to sustain us through the week. We could never do enough in an hour to make that true. Rather, we're called to worship God every day, throughout the day. In our acts of service and generosity. Our kind and affirming words. Our prophetic words of warning. Our reading of scripture. Our prayer and Sabbath-keeping.

So as we end with this time of prayer, make a list of what you can do this week.

### **Examine**

1. In the last week, how has your life demonstrated that God is your king?
2. In the last week, how has your denied that God is your king?
3. This week, what do you need to start doing because God is your king?
4. This week, what do you need to stop doing because God is king?

We're going to use a song to create some reflective space at the end of our time together. Please use that time to write down on your index card some ways you can "fill your own basket" this week.

### **Benediction**

Worship is supposed to be all about bringing what you've done throughout the week into the corporate worship space. So take your index cards with you this week. Use them as a reminder to fill your cards. Bring them back next week, as a symbol of your full basket. We'll collect and share them (so keep 'em anonymous if you want!) as a way to encourage each other!