

“Judgment Day?”

Third in a shared series of 3 sermons on Amos

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Amos 8:1-10

1 Thess. 4:16-5:11

Introduction to the theme:

I was perplexed this past Tuesday, when Robert Bailey sent the text of that day's Doonesbury cartoon. Robert described the scene: Chester (who I'm assuming must be Zonker Harris's neighbour) is handing Zonk (the comic strip's flighty, hippie character) the keys to Chester's Mercedes. Zonk is a little dubious and asks, “You want me to take your Mercedes coupe? Chester, what's going on here?”

Chester responds, “I'm being raptured, Zonk—on Saturday!”

Zonk says, “Raptured?” to which Chester responds, “Judgment Day! Where I'm going, I won't need a fancy ride!” Looking down his nose a bit, he continues, “You can scoff if you like, but come May 21, I'll be sitting in heaven. Sadly, you won't.”

Zonk responds as he looks at his new key, “Pretty close. I'll be sitting in my new Mercedes.” Chester, arms folded over his chest, says, “And how do you think it'll handle in lava?”

As of Tuesday, I didn't know about the prediction by the Californian radio broadcaster, Harold Camping, that the world was going to end . . . yesterday. Billboards and banners were hung throughout the world by his Family Radio network warning people of the event, and as of Wednesday, just about every newspaper I read carried reports of the stir being caused by this band of “true believers.”

Needless to say, most of the articles were laced with tones of smug humour about the poor, delusional would-be prophet and his devotees. Actually, the truth is, Mr. Camping is *not* poor; he's a multi-millionaire, and his nonprofit organization spent over \$100 million internationally advertising the end. What's really disturbing is that while *he's* got millions, he's persuaded who-knows-how-many naïve and gullible people who could not afford to, to quit their jobs, sell their homes, and spend their assets on getting the word out about Judgment Day. One paper reported that the teenaged children of one couple were worried because their parents had saved nothing for their college education, to say nothing of the parents' own future, because they didn't intend to be around next week, let alone next year. According to the *Detroit Free Press*, “when a recent caller to Camping's radio show asked whether people sending money to spread the word would get their cash back if this thing didn't pan out, Camping thundered: “This is going to happen. Millions will die. It's going to be horrible.” The question that begs to be asked today is who's helping those who got suckered?

It's been interesting to observe the reaction of the news media to Camping's prediction whilst at the same time thinking about how Amos was being received back in 750 BCE. We could talk for a long time about how many differences there are between Amos (whose prophecy was eventually accepted as bearing God's truth) and this modern-day false prophet. But as we conclude our three-week sermon series on the Book of Amos, I'd like to focus specifically today on the theme of ***divine judgment***. ***What is the nature of divine judgment—what does it look like? Is there an ultimate judgment, a literal Judgment Day? What does Amos have to teach us about it?***

“Judgment Day?”

Amos 8:1-10,

1 Thessalonians 4:16-5:11

Writing in response to the buzz around Harold Camping’s prophecy of the Judgment Day indubitably being scheduled for yesterday (Saturday, May 21st, 2011), Andrew Brown wrote in the *Guardian* on Thursday: “Although several religions or myth systems have stories about the end of everything, the hope of the last judgment is essential to Christianity.”

Like most bold, declarative statements that make claims about what is essential to our faith, I read that and thought, “Hmmm. That can be taken a whole bunch of different ways, can’t it? I wonder what he meant.”

Because of course, Mr. Brown is right in many respects. One could argue that the Christian faith *is* grounded in the hope of the last judgment. But what, exactly, do we think that is?

The statement, “the hope of the last judgment is essential to Christianity” could be taken to mean that we’re all waiting, like Mr. Camping and the Family Radio lot, for a day when trumpets will literally blare from heaven. As the “true believers” are swept up with Jesus in the clouds and taken up to heaven forever, those without “true faith” will be traumatized by an earthquake that will rattle the nations to their foundations as the first act of their entrance to an eternity in hell. That expectation could be argued by pasting together a few different passages from various books of the Bible, as Mr. Camping has done.

The trouble with this approach is that for all the “proof texts” that can be lifted to build a case, one could just as easily find other texts that put forward a different point of view. For example, the reading we heard from 1 Thessalonians this morning describes the vision of the faithful being gathered up into heaven. But read on, and Paul asserts that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Jesus said something similar in Matthew’s gospel—both about trumpets blaring, but also that that it will be completely unexpected, because “no one except the Father knows the day or the hour” when the Son of Man will return.

Proof-texting is dangerous because it always pulls verses out of their wider context (both literal and cultural), and acts as though they were intended to be used for a specific argument today. This approach treats the Bible as some sort of secret code that one simply needs to crack—as if it’s a puzzle to discover which verses are to be put together with which other verses, in order to read the mind of God. Furthermore, it seems to me that in situations like these, when verses are patched together to make the case for an imminent final judgment involving eternal hellfire and torment for the vast majority, there’s usually a rather self-righteous minority whose egos are fed by the thought that they’re in the heaven-bound crowd (even if some of them feel badly about those who are surely going to hell). This sort of approach also makes lots of assumptions about heaven and hell that are problematic, but that’s a subject for another time.

We’re focusing on the Book of Amos in this series, and as the past two Sunday sermons have demonstrated, Amos’s prophecy provides much instruction and food for thought as we contemplate the subject of divine judgment.

According to Amos, he was delivering the final judgment, and that was this: God’s relationship with Israel was over. Kaput. Spent. They had tried Yahweh’s patience time and time and time again; they had treated God like some sort of cosmic vending machine, pleading for mercy and salvation when they felt their comfortable ways of life under threat, gladly lapping up divine blessings when they were showered with them. But as soon as life

felt good again, the people Israel quickly forgot about God's grace and their own covenant to be faithful.

Throughout the most ancient pages of the Hebrew scriptures, it is clear and consistent: faithfulness to God involves practicing justice and kindness toward both neighbour and stranger, and remaining humbly mindful of their relationship with the Most High God. But apart from times of crisis, the people seemed incapable of remembering this.

Those of you who have read the entire book, and those who have participated in our two Bible study sessions on it so far, will be familiar with the ways that Amos lays out God's grievance against the people of Israel. The book starts with a mighty thunder; "The LORD roars from Zion," declares Amos, "and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up" (1:2). He speaks in vivid terms about how fed up the LORD is with the transgressions of Damascus, and Gaza, of Tyre, and Edom, of the Amonites and the Moabites—all of them are described as perpetrators of heinous war crimes. The Israelites probably enjoyed hearing about how all of their neighbouring nations were really going to "get it" from God—they were wicked people, obviously, and they were *in for it!*

Then the LORD (through Amos) moves in on Judah, Israel's annoying sister tribes and nation to the south. But as the Israelites were basking in the glee that Judah wasn't being left off the LORD's hit list, they were in for a bit of a shock when the prophet lit in on Israel itself! Amos counts the ways in which the people of Israel were completely beyond hope. Their sins may not have been as horrific as some of the war crimes their neighbouring nations were executing, but *they were worse*—because **they knew better**. They were in relationship with God, and God's rules for living were clear; when the nation lived by God's laws, things ran smoothly everyone lived in harmony. The poor didn't starve, everyone was clothed, no one felt cheated, everyone had enough and many had an abundance. Heed God's laws and live: it was pretty straightforward.

In the past, when they had strayed from God's will and turned their backs on God's ways, Israel had experienced some of ways in which God had tried to retrieve their attention: hunger and drought, blights upon their crops, pestilence, defeat in war. And in the past, these things had worked.

But now, despite the success they had experienced when living by God's laws, they were yet again deliberately abandoning the standards of public morality that had provided an ethos of wellbeing for everyone in society. They, like so many identifiable aspects of our contemporary society, gladly traded justice and goodness for material wealth and personal gain, leading people to prey on one another. Justice wasn't merely about sorting out the rich from the poor, either—as if only the rich were to blame for the suffering. The poor also preyed on the poor. There was no goodness left among the people, and God's patience was used up. Judgment day had arrived.

As a sort of final review in this three-week survey of the Book of Amos, I'd like to suggest that Amos is saying several things about God, and about divine judgment.

First is the message that Yahweh, the LORD God, is sovereign. God would preside as judge over all peoples and all nations. This may seem like an obvious statement to us today, but that's because we inhabit a monotheistic world. In Amos's day, the people believed that the gods competed with each other, and each nation's god would reward or punish the people based on their faithfulness or ability to make the gods happy. The notion that Yahweh was judging not just Israel, but all of the nations—not to mention rewarding or denying everyone

—this was a new concept.

Second, and connected to God's sovereignty, is the idea that not only was Israel's God the judge of all peoples and nations, but *all people and nations were equally employed by God to accomplish divine purposes*. Therefore, if Israel was destroyed by another nation, it was not merely the case that Yahweh allowed it to happen, but rather that Yahweh somehow orchestrated the event in order to make a point! Equally, God was able to use circumstances that appeared accidental from a human point of view to do divine work.

Third is the message that, fundamental to the covenant between God and Israel is mutual fidelity—and Israel has time and again proven herself an unfaithful partner. This image and theme is actually developed more powerfully by Amos's contemporary, Hosea, who portrays Israel as a harlot and an unfaithful wife. But it is because of Israel's repeated unfaithfulness—expressed by behaviours that oppress the poor and the stranger, that cheat anyone they can swindle, and that seizes every opportunity to further their own gain even at the unfair expense of others—it is because of all this that Amos sees no hope for her in his vision of God's judgment. God has communicated with Israel in countless ways, and made the divine word plain to them from generation to generation . . . since Moses led them out of their slavery in Egypt.

Fourth and finally, is the pivotal message: that justice is the basis of a healthy society, and Israel has abandoned all regard for this. As a result, the society is rotten to the core; it is fatally ill. "Amos has no program for change; it was too late for that. What he offers is an explanation of what has gone wrong, and why it is so wrong that God must intervene in a drastic way."¹ If justice is the basis of a healthy society, and God is the judge presiding over all people, then there was no way that God could allow the people's injustice to continue any longer. The integrity of a just and sovereign God demanded that mercy and longsuffering were now spent, and justice must prevail. The nation of Israel would be destroyed, and the people scattered. It was a devastating picture, perhaps the bleakest picture of God's relationship with Israel in all of scripture.

Donald Gowan, in his commentary on the Book of Amos, writes: "It must be emphasized that this is no picture of the whole character of God, but the need for such a message did not evaporate with the exiling of Israel and Judah. It remains a word addressed to those who complacently do as they please, feeling no responsibility to anyone. [The prophet] Zephaniah described such persons long ago: 'At that time I will search/Jerusalem with lamps,/and I will punish the people/who rest complacently on/their dregs,/those who say in their hearts,/'The LORD will not do good,/nor will he do harm.' (Zeph. 1:12 NRSV)

"This 'practical atheism,'" Gowan continues, "the notion that God is indifferent to and uninvolved in human concerns, is a far more popular point of view than any theoretical atheism. *Over and against it must be set Amos's claim that there is a God who is intensely active, and that the day will come when that God cannot be avoided.*"²

I think we would be either missing or avoiding a really important opportunity if we didn't take time to wrestle with our own thoughts regarding divine judgment.

Is God the kind of Judge who will punish or take vengeance on the wicked? If not, then what consolation might there be for the victims of heinous acts of evil who have no other hope for retribution? Does divine justice require retribution? And if so, then what will that look like?

¹ Donald E. Gowan, *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII, p. 397.

² *Ibid*, p. 422, emphasis mine.

Where is the line drawn with respect to which behaviours deserve punishment? Is murder worse than wishing someone dead—or worse than acting as though someone doesn't deserve to be treated with the same dignity and humanity as oneself? Will it be the case, as many Christians believe, that anyone who in their lifetime doesn't accept Jesus as their personal Saviour will be condemned to spend eternity in hell?

Do you believe that God intervenes in specific events in the world in order to achieve justice or exact divine judgment?—Does God use earthquakes and tsunamis, famines and floods to punish people, whether individuals, communities, or entire nations? Certainly, as we read in Amos, there is scriptural testimony that argues that this is the case. I do not think we ought to toss those texts aside, as if they have nothing of God's word to speak to us today.

But there are other passages that paint completely different images of God, including the image of God-in-the-flesh, Emmanuel, who chose to become one of us. Willingly abasing the divine self, submitting not just to the rejection of beloved friends, but also to a most humiliating and tortured ending, even to death on a cross, God revealed a profound truth about divine judgment, and about the nature of divine love. This is divine intervention in a whole different light, and it gives entirely new meaning to Judgment Day.

It may be that the best answer is not to presume to understand God's ways, or to claim to know God's mind with utter certainty. We are confused enough about human definitions of justice: Christians alone (much less than the human race) were dramatically divided over whether Osama bin Laden received justice when he was gunned down in cold blood a few weeks ago. And our notions of how to behave justly with other nations and peoples vacillates wildly based on what serves our own interest and security. Who are we to think that we should be able to discern what divine justice ought to look like?

My concept and experience of God is **not** one that sees God intervening in certain circumstances and avoiding or failing to act in others. That would make divine justice arbitrary, which at best is far too human, and at worst is no justice at all. Based on my reading of the whole of Scripture, alongside my observations about the world and my personal experiences of God, I am convinced that God is the author of justice as well as love; and God's justice and love are infinitely wiser, broader, and deeper than anyone's ability to fathom.

I believe that God abides in all of life, penetrating and giving breath and life to all that is, tirelessly creating and playing—and creativity and play are naturally destructive and wasteful activities at times. But equally, they can be redeeming, renewing, and resurrecting activities. None of us can pretend to understand or grasp the full picture of life's complexity, nor do we have answers to most of the complicated questions about how and why God does what God does.

"The hope of the last judgment is central to Christianity." I'm not sure how Andrew Brown of the *Guardian* would unpack that himself.

But here is the Gospel truth: God's love for humankind and for this creation is so deep and so intimate that, even when one considers the scope of our universe and the fact that we are but a speck in the scheme of countless other universes, God's judgment was that **we are worth dying for**. And not just that, but we're also worth rising again for, in spite of the odds. In Jesus Christ, we have God's final word—and the final judgment for us is a judgment of love. Glory and praise and thanks be to God! Amen.

