

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 12, 2023

Worship that Pleases

Amos 5:18-24 Lectionary 32/ 24th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

By the sermon title, you may have guessed that I'm preaching on Amos today. And you'd be right. Something that you'll learn about me is that I love wrestling with and preaching on the Hebrew Bible text. I fully believe that God's law and God's gospel extends through the entirety of the Biblical text – from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. There's a reason that the early Christianity affirmed these texts as Scripture and rejected the theologies and doctrines that tried to exclude these scriptures from the Christian canon.

I'm going to ask you to fill in the blank.

"It wouldn't be worship without *blank*"

Write it down. Say it out loud. Whatever. But fill in the blank.

"It wouldn't be worship without *blank*"

There's no right or wrong answer here. What makes what we do here together "worship" for you?

For me, it is singing with you all. One of the comments I hear frequently from less liturgical traditions is: you guys sing A LOT. And they're right. We do. And I love it.

Because for much of the rest of the service, I'm leading, I'm DOING something. While it is worship for me when I lead, music and singing are my moments to join with you in worship. Though I do greatly appreciate that being here, I get to lead worship and listen to a sermon on the weeks I don't preach. And I get to be a worship participant on the weeks that I preach. It's a great balance.

Not being able to sing together during the pandemic was so difficult for me. It wasn't the hardest part of the pandemic – but it was probably in the top 5 most difficult things for me. Worship just isn't quite worship without singing together – at least for me.

It is tough hearing today's text: Take away from me the noise of your songs. But but... What's worship without song? Or the melodies of the organ or the handbells or the choir? Is that really so displeasing to God?

A bit of context for our first reading: Amos was one of the earliest prophets with writings directly attributed to him, prophesying in the 7th century BCE. God called Amos to the difficult if not impossible task of being a Judean – a southern boy and a shepherd at that – preaching to Israel in the North. He was a layperson – not a priest or court prophet or part of the religious elite.

After the death of King Solomon, the resulting power struggle led to the division of the Kingdom of Israel into two – with Judah being in the South and Israel in the north. By the time of Amos, with the separation permanent, that Northern kingdom experienced prosperity. The time was marked by a widening gap between the affluent urban elites and the poor. Despite the prosperity, at least according to Amos, the society was corrupt and characterized by the neglect of the poor and the vulnerable.

While the elites expected the day of the Lord to be one of victory and celebration and deliverance from the hands of their enemies, Amos preaches that their expectation may not be reality. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness?

God's voice takes over from there.

"I hate, I despise your festivals, I will not accept (your offerings), take away from me the noise of your songs. Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"

In other words:

"It wouldn't be worship without justice and righteousness."

I can't believe that our gathering – with everything that makes this worship for us – is displeasing to God. I'm leaning into the bluntness as divine hyperbole. The hyperbole makes the point: worship without the real-world effects, worship that doesn't shape the lives we live and the world around us, isn't worship to God.

Justice and righteousness in writings prior to the Babylonian exile always refer to divine activity. Justice and righteousness are gifts from God. Jörg

Jeremias in his Amos commentary points out that for the prophets, ““justice and righteousness” are not “behavioral goals, but rather primarily gifts from God which Israel can allow to flourish, can support, or can obstruct, indeed (Amos 5:7; 6:12) can overthrow.”¹

When God imagines worship, God doesn't hope for God's people to just go through the motions, the rituals. But that through the motions, the ritual, the music, we accept God's gifts that allow us and our neighbor to flourish.

In a couple weeks, we'll hear Jesus tell us, when the Son of Man comes, the nations will be judged by the way they care for the least of these. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’... ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’”²

In the Gospels, Jesus echoes the prophets, inviting us to a worship that through music, through the Word, through the meal, strengthens us to worship God through our words and our deeds. When Jesus speaks of the final judgment, he doesn't recount the songs sung or the liturgies observed, but rather the cups of water given, the hungry fed, the strangers welcomed, and the naked clothed. This is worship in action, a melody of mercy and a harmony of humanity.

As Lutherans, we believe that there is nothing that we can do to earn our place with God. We are saved by grace through faith – because Jesus. We don't earn or lose our place here. I think about it this way: I can do things that displease my parents. But thankfully, I have the kind of relationship with my parents that the things I have done that displeases them do not end their love for me. [I know that may not be true in all families] We ALL do things that displease God – we are all sinners in need of God's grace through Jesus. The opposite is also true: we ALL do things that please God.

¹ Jörg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos: A Commentary*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 102-103.

² Matthew 25:34-36, 37

My favorite treatise of Martin Luther is *The Freedom of a Christian*. It isn't... perfect and without problems (but I bet in 500 years, the same may be said for my writings and preaching).

He writes this:

“For a human being does not live in this mortal body solely for himself or herself and work only on it but lives together with all other human beings on earth. Indeed, more to the point, each person lives only for others and not for himself or herself... This should be the rule: that the good things we have from God may flow from one person to the other and become common property. In this way each person may “put on” his [or her] neighbor and conduct oneself toward him [or her] as if in the neighbor’s place. These good things flowed and flow into us from Christ, who put us on and acted for us, as if he himself were what we are... Therefore, we conclude that Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith they are caught up beyond themselves into God; likewise through love they fall down beneath themselves into the neighbor—remaining nevertheless always in God and God’s love.”³

The worship that pleases God is worship that feeds us here and extends beyond these walls. Worship is an expression of our freedom in Christ, which urges us to live not for ourselves, but for our neighbors in love.

As we leave these walls, we are called not as not as people who have merely engaged in worship, but as those who live out worship in every act of kindness, justice, and righteousness we perform. May our lives be the echoes of the songs we sing today, reverberating through the acts of love we share tomorrow. May we embody the worship that pleases God, a worship that does not just please the ear but moves out with our hands, our hearts, our voices.

³ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of A Christian*, in *Annotated Luther*, Volume 1, 519, 530-532. Accordance Edition.

May we leave here with the gifts of God's justice and righteousness, trusting in the one whose love knows no bounds, whose grace sustains and feeds us. Today. And always.

Amen.