

What Do You See?  
Amos 18.1-12  
Pentecost +9C  
Sunday, July 17, 2016  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Like any true prophet, Amos had his hands full with people who weren't interested in listening to him. The people of Israel are now the ruling class and quite comfortable. They are amassing wealth, enjoying their lives, and enjoying the conveniences that money can buy. Amos is sent by God to disrupt the party. Today's word is not "Comfort, comfort my people." In the biblical cycle of forgetting and remembering identity and calling, the people of Israel have forgotten who they are. They have forgotten they are a community. They have forgotten they are called to be a particular kind of people. They don't want to remember because remembering will cost them their comfort. Remembering will kill the party once and for all. Frederick Buechner paints Amos' target audience like this:

When the prophet Amos walked down the main drag, it was like a shoot-out in the Old West. Everybody ran for cover. His special target was The Beautiful People, and shooting from the hip, he never missed his mark. He pictures them sleek and tanned at Palm Beach, Acapulco, St. Tropez. They glisten with Bain de Soleil. The stereo is piped out over the marble terrace. Another tray of bloody Marys is on the way. A vacationing bishop plunges into the heated pool.<sup>1</sup>

Amos has come to warn these people of wealth and comfort and privilege; warn them that they have forgotten everyone but themselves. They are no longer mindful of the poor. They do not see injustice. They are numb to the suffering of others. They do not care if their wealth is earned on the backs of those who cannot afford both food and medicine. They do not SEE anymore. They do not HEAR anymore. And the consequence of no longer seeing and hearing the poor, the widow, the orphan is that God is speaking in their midst and moving in their midst. If you cannot see and hear those who are pushed aside by the powerful, then eventually and ultimately, you cannot see and hear God.

Amos challenges those who have the luxury of not seeing and not hearing. Will you close your eyes and cling to your comfort? Will you open your eyes and see the world

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: Amos*

as it really is? Will you stick your fingers in your ears as people cry for help? Or will you listen to the voices calling out for friendship, support, advocacy, and care? If you choose to close your eyes and plug your ears long enough, you really will go deaf and blind, Amos warns. Actually, he doesn't warn so much as he promises.

How is it that we get to a place where we can no longer see and no longer hear another? A Hindu saint who was visiting the river Ganges to take bath found a group of family members on the banks, shouting in anger at each other. He turned to his disciples, smiled and asked: 'Why do people in anger shout at each other?'

The disciples thought for a while, one of them said, 'Because we lose our calm, we shout.'

'But, why should you shout when the other person is just next to you? You can as well tell him what you have to say in a soft manner?' asked the saint.

Disciples gave some other answers but none satisfied the other disciples.

Finally, the saint explained: 'When two people are angry at each other, their hearts distance a lot. To cover that distance they must shout to be able to hear each other. The angrier they are, the stronger they will have to shout to hear each other to cover that great distance.

What happens when two people fall in love? They don't shout at each other but talk softly, because their hearts are very close. The distance between them is either nonexistent or very small.'

The saint continued, 'When they love each other even more, what happens? They do not speak, only whisper and they get even closer to each other in their love. Finally they even need not whisper, they only look at each other and that's all. That is how close two people are when they love each other.'

He looked at his disciples and said. 'So when you argue do not let your hearts get distant, do not say words that distance each other more, or else there will come a day when the distance is so great that you will not find the path to return.'<sup>2</sup>

Here we are. Standing before the path. Voices crying out. Suffering at every turn. A month ago it was Orlando. Simply naming cities and countries, we can bring to mind

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mindpodnetwork.com/shout-anger/>

tremendous violence and tragedy in recent weeks: Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas, Baghdad, Turkey, Nice. We can ignore it all and assure ourselves that God is present and in control. We can affirm that God is love and pass along our thoughts and prayers. But we know that isn't enough. We know we are ready for more. We know we will not allow the distance between our comfort and the world's great need to become so great that we cannot find our way back to the path of God.

I was getting ready to head out to the beach—Alton Sterling already on my mind—when I glanced at my phone one more time and saw the news of Philando Castille. I'd already promised myself I would leave the phone in a drawer whenever we went anywhere on our vacation, looking at it only in the morning and evenings. As soon as I saw the headlines, I couldn't unsee them. I sat on the beach, the beautiful white sands of the Gulf and the aqua water of the Florida panhandle, and I felt my discomfort in that idyllic place. Surely paradise is something like that very spot where my family kayaked and hunted for sand dollars and sea shells! Already a person learning to manage my anxiety, I was particularly restless in that restful place. I closed my eyes and listened to the waves and counted them until I reached 100, trying to still my mind and help it to be where my body was. To unsee, just for a little while, what I had seen.

What a luxury to choose whether or not I would pay attention to the news of more violence! Because the perceived threat isn't anyone who looks like me, I can choose when I pay attention and don't pay attention or whether I will listen or not listen to the voices asking for my alliance and advocacy and action.

I remained present in that place because I needed that soul and body rest and, in part, because I made a promise to my family. I made a promise to play and rest and swim and eat and focus only on the beauty of our safe, whole, healthy tribe. And so I did. And yet, my mind kept bringing me back here and replaying my words to you from my June 26 sermon as I challenged us all:

[T]he time is right. The sound of sheer silence surrounds us. We know God is near. We feel the warmth of God's breath and the expansiveness of that silence as God fills the cracked corners and scorched earth around us. God is near. God is calling us back to our prophetic identity as advocates, activists, and people of faith who live out the stuff of their prayers with the passions of their daily lives.

Will you join me? Will you reclaim this prophetic identity? Will you accept the call God has placed on you? Will you embrace the commission to go into the wilderness of the world with the message of who God is and how God loves and

what God's great dreams for the world are? Will you cry out and remind and stir the pot in Jesus' name?

And who knew three weeks ago what the next days would bring! These are transformational times. We choose now how we will respond. Will we see? Will we hear? Will we cling to our comfort and step away from the path? The overwhelming response I hear from you is an eagerness and readiness to act.

Tim and I emailed and texted at the end of that week as I began thinking practically about how we at St. Charles might move into these times from the truth of who we are. A first step is how we use our mid-week community meals. Following the academic calendar, from September through May, we gather on Wednesdays at 5:30 p.m. for a shared meal in our Fellowship Hall downstairs. After eating and chatting, we typically go over announcements, share life concerns and then have a rotating study of some sort. For 2016-2017, I propose a monthly rotation that begins with a Peace Dinner on the first Wednesday of each month. I have already begun to invite a diverse panel of community leaders to join us as we listen to ways we can better become allies, advocates, and activists in our community. I'm inviting faith leaders, teachers, organizers, and neighbors to join us for a monthly Peace Dinner as we open ourselves to partnership and collaboration in New Orleans and beyond.

The second Wednesday will be dedicated to Mission Action—either a continuation of awareness or a hands-on project as a community. The third will be a variety of Prayer Experiences led by you, divided into small groups, or led by the Pastoral Staff as we focus on spiritual wellness and connectivity in our prayer lives. The final week of each month will allow time for various committees and planning teams to meet to focus our efforts into actions steps. Peace, Action, Prayer, Planning. We'll rotate through this cycle each month beginning Wednesday, September 7.

A second recommendation is to focus on the partnerships we already have and find ways to actually step up as full partners and not just financial contributors. The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America is a network of peacemaking Baptists who reminds us, in their words, "that peace, like war, is waged. Peacemaking is an active enterprise, not a passive posture. Scripture commands us to 'seek peace, and pursue it'" (Psalm 34:14, 1 Peter 3:11)."<sup>3</sup> Of the many resources BPFNA provides is curriculum for partner congregations to form their own Peacemaking Groups. I have passed this resource on to our Mission Action Committee, and you may also find it under "Resources" at

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bpfna.org/areyou>

BPFNA.org. I ask that anyone interested in “waging peace” in our world connect with MAC in their ongoing work of advocacy, awareness, and action.

Another denominational partner, the Alliance of Baptists, has ongoing Alliance Communities “to organize for ministry and action. The goal is to provide a place of belonging for Alliance members who seek a wider engagement with the Church and the world.” Alliance Communities already exist around: Abolishing the death penalty, Equity for women in the church, Cuba partnerships, Justice for Palestine & Israel, Peace & Justice work, Racial Justice & Multiculturalism, LGBTQ safe spaces, Homelessness, Hunger, and Prison Reform. We are active Alliance partners. These Alliance Communities are already available to you, their next annual gathering is April 2017 in Raleigh, North Carolina, and these Communities will meet in person to plot goodness together. Until then, links to every Alliance Community and its corresponding leader are on their web site, [allianceofbaptists.org](http://allianceofbaptists.org). You can connect and then report back to this congregation about how we might partner and collaborate.

Lastly, many of you are participating in Summer book groups reading Rob Bell’s *How To Be Here*. It isn’t a complicated book. It isn’t heavy with theological concepts that invite wrestling and debate. My secret hope in choosing this light read was that Bell’s book would get us asking questions about how our lives are giving flesh to God’s ways. And then those questions would lead us to ask how we are giving flesh to God’s ways as a people here. As a community. As a body. How do we live out this faith? What does calling look like for you as individuals? What does calling look like for us as a church in this town, on this corner, in this century? You are asking these questions, and I hear you offering similar, unified answers as you are responding to the cries of our world.

The voices of the prophets still call out to us. We choose how we will respond. We choose the distance we will allow between our lives of comfort and the great suffering of our world. We choose whether or not we will see and hear injustice, violence, tragedy, poverty and their root causes. What do you see? What do you hear? How will you respond? Will you join us here as we step onto the path of God’s love and action?