

## Like the Mourning for an Only Son

Last Sunday, I had difficulty delivering my sermon because of my sinus problems and congestion. This Sunday, I may have difficulty for other reasons – every time I think about the subject at hand, I get so overwhelmed I just want to cry...

The difficulty I'm experiencing this morning actually started last Saturday, of course, when the verdict in the George Zimmerman case was delivered. Despite my lingering illness, it had been a really good day. As I think many of you know, the annual Evergreen Association Black Caucus Barbecue is an event that means a great deal to me. I am a Son of the South, the descendent of slave owners and a member of a family in some parts of which blatant racism is still tolerated. The way that the leadership of the Black Caucus has adopted me as one of their own moves me in a way I can scarcely describe. When I add to that the true fellowship that happens among members of all our Evergreen caucuses at that event, it makes for one of my favorite days of the year, the long hours of preparation it requires of me notwithstanding.

So to hear the racially charged news of Mr. Zimmerman's acquittal on Saturday night was an especially hard blow. My first reaction was anger toward the jury that they could participate in such a miscarriage of justice, such an unfair and callous dismissal of the life of a young black man in favor of an armed defender of the property rights of lighter skinned and more prosperous folk. Frankly, this reaction in me was also unfair, as I was reminded by an older and wiser relative after I expressed my anger in a Facebook post. As he pointed out, the six-person jury had been willing to do their civic duty by serving and had followed their instructions in the case which for them had to do not with the fairness of the law but with the law's faithful administration. It was a good reminder to me, as Paul told the Ephesians, that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against... the spiritual forces of evil..." More on that later.

I couldn't address this subject with you all last Sunday. I simply wasn't ready, emotionally, or capable, physically. And it was important to me to give you all the message of hope that I had found in attending the ABC Mission Summit. But already Sunday morning, I was wondering how I could express my deep feelings about God's restorative justice in this matter in a Biblical lesson with integrity. And I found the answer as I surveyed the lectionary readings for today and read the passage I just shared with you. In the face of repeated failures of justice by the leaders of the nation of Israel, God warned that their actions would have dire consequence. To Amos, God revealed that the near future for Israel would be "like the mourning for an only son."

Trayvon Martin was an only son. I can only imagine the pain that his parents must continue to feel. This morning, I want to walk through the language of Amos, which may have grown obscure to us, to find the lessons in Scripture that will help us to process this American tragedy. But I also want to remember another only son, Jesus of Nazareth, whose death was at first an occasion for mourning but became, thanks to his subsequent resurrection, the cause for our deepest joy.

To begin, we must put the work of Amos in context. Not a member of one of the guilds of prophets that had grown up in his day, he was rather an insignificant farmer from the southern kingdom of Judah sent by God to prophesy in the northern court of Israel. He was poorly received in that venue, as can be imagined. His messages were sneered at and he was threatened.

## Like the Mourning for an Only Son

He was preaching, you see, to the immensely popular heads of the government at a time of unprecedented prosperity for the northern kingdom. The ruler, Jeroboam II, is still commemorated by the use of his name for a mark of rather ostentatious wealth. Fine wines are normally sold in bottles of about 750 millilitres. If you can afford a magnum, or 1.5 litres of fine wine, you are probably “in the money.” But if you can buy a Jeroboam, a three litre bottle of fine wine, you are undoubtedly wealthy.

In Amos’ vision, this affluent society is compared by God to a basket of summer fruit. In Hebrew this word is “*qayits*.” The Hebrew word for “end,” as in “the end has come upon my people,” is “*qets*.” If you don’t hear the pun, I’d point out that in my Southern childhood the word “quit” was often pronounced “quee-ut.” The lush looking summer fruit of Israel, God says, is past its prime. Rot has set in. The society is still lovely to look at but leaves a bad taste in God’s mouth. Their behavior is beginning to stink. They have, in fact, reached the end of the line, as far as God is concerned. The persecuted slaves of Egypt were rescued by God when God saved them from a plague that struck down the first born of all Egyptian families and livestock. Painting lamb’s blood on the lintels of their houses caused the angel of death to “pass them by” in the first Passover. But now, says God, “I will never again pass them by.”

In their prosperity, you see, too many of the Children of Israel have become persecutors. They are now the ones “that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.” The merchants and those who control the markets can scarcely wait for the holy days and the Sabbaths to come to an end so that they can resume making money. They have forgotten that the Sabbath ethic was to benefit all, including the poor, and that that same ethic was extended in Torah to Sabbath years when the poor and wild animals are provided with food, slaves are given release to freedom after six years, and those in deep debt are forgiven their debts.

So far have they wandered from their faithfulness to God and God’s law that they have become downright crooked in their business practices. Ralph W. Klein of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, points out “Making the ephah small means the merchants cheated on the amount of goods they gave the customer; making the shekel large means they put a heavy weight in the balance when the customer put her or his money on the scale.” These sharp dealers got their customers both ways. They even boasted of selling the sweepings of the wheat, something expressly forbidden in Torah as threshing floors were to be left unswept so that the poor could come and glean from them.

Among the results of this injustice, says God, will be an earthquake, which the introductory verse of chapter one says came just two years later. The land will tremble “and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt.” My experience of the Nisqually or Ash Wednesday quake of 2001 confirms for me the accuracy of this description. Sitting in a solid chair on a solid floor on what I thought was solid ground, I experienced the kind of rolling motion that I normally associate with being in a boat. I’m sure some of you had the same experience. And, again, the reference to Egypt is significant. The plagues which God sent upon the oppressor Pharaoh to let his people go are now being experienced by those who were oppressed then because they in turn have become oppressors. They will mourn as the Egyptians did who lost their only sons in the dark side of the Passover miracle. Israel is become Egypt.

## Like the Mourning for an Only Son

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.” This is, perhaps, the most dreadful forecast of all. As a result of their selfish and greedy lifestyles, people will no longer be able to hear God’s word to them. Frederick Buechner puts this into current context: “Towards the end, God will make Godself so scarce that the world won’t even know what it’s starving to death for.”

Doesn’t that sound to you like the “First World” that most North Americans and Europeans inhabit? So many people running to and fro searching for meaning and they don’t even know what it is they are starving to death for. We educated folk, those with time on our hands to ponder the meaning of life, indulge in a search for meaning that is all too often simply a shopping for a philosophy that will make us feel good about ourselves while continuing to live a lifestyle that takes little account of the hundreds of homeless in our own community, the thousands that go to bed hungry every night in our country, the millions around the world who live lives that none of us would accept because of political or economic oppression.

Like the people of Israel under Jeroboam II, even after an international recession, we still have so much. There are still so many in our country who grow fat and happy from gouging the poor. We make no pretense any more about not making money on the Sabbath. Ralph Klein, whom I cited earlier, points out that “Condemning unnamed ‘crooked merchants’” is far too easy an escape. “How about comparing the 350 or so billion we spend on Defense to the piddling amounts we dole out via welfare? Or to our educational systems? Is this not the rich cheating the poor as well?” How about the fact that we have allowed our beloved state of Washington to continue to be ranked by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy as the most regressive tax system in the country? Thanks to our system of high property and sales taxes and no income taxes, the bottom 20 percent of income earners pays 17 percent of their income in taxes; the middle 20 percent pays 10 percent; the top one percent pays a mere 2.8 percent of their income in taxes.

Not convinced that the United States is following the pattern of Jeroboam’s Israel by cheating the poor? In the infamous expense cutting measure of the U.S. Congress known as “the sequester,” millions of dollars were cut from a range of government programs. Most have not been restored. But Congress quickly bowed to a storm of criticism from business travelers that their cuts to FAA flight controllers were resulting in delays and rescheduling for those executives and the cuts were restored. Meanwhile, last week, the House of Representatives voted to eliminate 100 percent of funding for food stamps from the Farm Bill. As a result, food stamps are currently unfunded in the federal budget.

Like Israel, the United States runs the risk of becoming Egypt; the oppressed becoming the oppressor. Or, more accurately, we have already done so and, after congratulating ourselves for becoming a more just society, we are now reverting to form. Our national myth celebrates the fact that the early colonists of North America came seeking relief from persecution. But what we often forget to mention is that those colonists began almost immediately to persecute those they found already here and soon grew their economy on the backs of those who were kidnapped in Africa and sold into slavery on this continent.

## Like the Mourning for an Only Son

In addition to the Congressional defunding of food assistance to those in need, this past month has seen the gutting of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by the Supreme Court. That landmark legislation, which overturned decades of the legalized denial of the basic right of citizens to vote, was the centerpiece of the effort to bring our African American brothers and sisters into full citizenship in the United States. Now that it has been dismantled, Black folks are fearful of a return to the bad old days. Writing for *Sojourners* magazine, Lisa Sharon Harper, Director of Mobilizing for Sojourners, puts it this way: “The old Jim Crow is back. Not to be confused with Michelle Alexander's New Jim Crow, the old Jim Crow was a web of laws designed to affirm and reinforce the spiritual lie of colonial and antebellum antiquity; that some people were meant to be slaves and others were simply meant to be masters and only whites are fully human. In today's terms, we might understand it this way: The lives, souls, and livelihoods of white Americans are worthy of protection more than others.”

To put it another way, the “Stand Your Ground” laws of Florida and 24 other states privilege property over life and the way they are being enforced privilege the property of one group over the lives of another. It's a way for one group of people to say to another, “my stuff is more important than your life.” In the instance of Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman profiled a black teenager as a potential burglar, stalked him, and when violently confronted by the youngster, shot him dead. Zimmerman decided that his stuff was more important than that kid's life. Let's buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals!

It is so hard for those of us who take for granted the privileges of the majority culture to see the minority viewpoint on this. Jim Wallis, the founder of *Sojourners* and editor of the magazine, writes this: “White parents should ask black parents what they were talking about with their children (last) weekend. It is a long-standing conversation between black dads and moms, especially with their boys, about how to carefully behave in the presence of police officers with guns. Now they must add any stranger who might have a gun and could claim they were fearful of a black man and had to shoot. The spread of legalized carried-and-concealed weapons and the generous self-defense laws that accompany the guns will lead to the death of more black men in particular. Death is horrible enough. But systematic injustice — one that allows white boys to assume success, yet leads black boys to cower from the very institutions created to protect our own wellbeing — is a travesty... If black youth in America can't rely on the police, the law, or their own neighborhood for protection — where can they go?”

“Systematic injustice...” What we are talking about here is not the sin of one man, not the acquittal or conviction of George Zimmerman, but a spirit of injustice that has come to pervade our society. This is why I cited Ephesians earlier in my sermon. While it is tempting to single out Mr. Zimmerman as the villain of the hour, he is as much a victim of the spirit of injustice as Trayvon. Because we have allowed our culture to fall under the sway of greed and violence, those who do not have the power of God in Christ in their lives are generally unable to resist the power of that unhappy spirit. It is not our place to declare George Zimmerman or the jurors in Florida to be our enemies or the enemies of God. It is rather our place to work for the redemption of our culture, a shift in the importance given to wealth, a repudiation of the way of violence.

## Like the Mourning for an Only Son

These are, of course, lessons from that other “only son,” Jesus. Jesus also died at the hands of those desperate to protect their place in the world, those in service to empire, wealth and temporal power. Unlike young Mr. Martin, of course, he did not die in a street fight but rebuked his friends who would have adopted violence on his behalf, went to his execution without a struggle and forgave those who “pulled the trigger.” Jesus calls us to follow him rather than the prevailing spirit of our day. That means standing for justice but with love first in our hearts, using our system of law and governance to protect and relieve the oppressed without giving in to the thirst for violence in deed or word, no matter how redemptive it may initially appear.

As I read this passage from Amos this week, God’s pronouncement that the end had come upon the people of Israel put me in mind of a song and a movie. The song was “The End” by the Doors, used to such chilling effect in the movie “Apocalypse Now” by Francis Ford Coppola. It is perhaps the ultimate movie treatment of the Vietnam War, a parable of the power of empire run amuck, greed and violence descended into madness. As I read Amos’ predictions of the ruin to come upon Israel, I thought of the movie’s scenes of mass death and destruction. “This is the end, my only friend, the end / of our elaborate plans, the end...” “Then the Lord said to me, The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” And then I remembered that the end did indeed come for the Northern Kingdom, just about 25 years after Amos preached in Samaria. But I also remembered that his prophecy closes with a promise, a promise that God would restore David’s Kingdom. And I remembered how that prophecy also was fulfilled, not as Israel expected with a mighty king on a white charger but rather with a humble carpenter and teacher on a donkey.

My sisters and brothers, there are those in our culture now who preach that the end of things will come if we do not arm ourselves and protect what is ours. I say to you that this is nonsense. We must put up the sword and abjure the power of empire, the power of dominant majority culture. The time has come instead for us to hear our brothers and our sisters crying and to make their grief our grief. The time has come for us to learn the stories of the strangers among us, those who do not look like us or talk like us or dress like us or eat like us. The time has come for us to speak and to act for justice for the oppressed, for the poor, for the frightened. The time has come for us to live our lives guided by the visions of Amos and God’s prophets, to walk in the way of Jesus. In this way, we will work with God to heal God’s beautiful world. Amen.