

“God and Kings”

Reading: Amos 7:7-15; Mark 6:14-29

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Just this last week, the *New Horizons* probe made its flyby of the Pluto system. This is an exciting time to be alive. We literally did not know what we might find. Before *New Horizons* started getting close enough to Pluto to start taking pictures of it, the best images we had of Pluto were literally a blur; just enough to tantalize us. Every image the spacecraft has taken has been better than the one before it, and even *New Horizons*' worst photos were a huge improvement over any glimpse of Pluto before. It's going to take 16 months for all of the data to be transmitted, and just what they've received since Tuesday has already gone far beyond what they expected. The technology and ingenuity required to successfully hit a target billions of miles away after ten years of traveling at more than 36,000 miles an hour would have been simply unimaginable not that long ago. But as deserving of praise as the scientists are who made this mission possible, and as impressive as their knowledge and technology are, the whole point is to discover what's already there, and has been there for a very long time.

Practically every time we look up in the sky, we see something that amazes us, and we haven't even begun to scratch the surface of what's out there. Our solar system is inhabited by far more than just boring chunks of rock. Europa, a moon of Jupiter, is thought to have a huge ocean underneath its icy shell, maybe containing twice as much water as there is in Earth's oceans. Io, another of Jupiter's moons, would be an ideal guess for the location of hell, since it's covered in volcanoes and is literally made up of burning sulfur. Saturn's moon Enceladus has cryo-volcanoes on its southern pole, launching out ice into space. Titan, another of Saturn's moons, rains down liquid methane into its vast hydrocarbon rivers and seas. Pluto has one moon that may be as dark as charcoal, and others that may be shaped like footballs. We live in an incredibly beautiful and strange universe. Our lives and the things we can see are incredibly tiny.

I realize that there is a certain amount of irony in starting my sermon today with the *New Horizons* mission as a way of helping us gain some perspective. There is irony in comparing a robotic space probe, the height of human technology and ingenuity, exploring the far reaches of our stunningly beautiful solar system, with the prophet Amos, whose book is our focus for today. It would be hard to find a starker contrast. Amos was a keeper of sheep and a farmer of figs. It doesn't get much more earthy than that. He was not high born or influential, nor was he powerful or rich. He definitely had some skill as a prophet, since his book is well crafted, but he was a humble, everyday man. He was “neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet,” just a shepherd, but the Lord had other plans for him.

I love his story, because it is so artfully recorded for us in his book. Amos begins to follow God's plan for him by preaching a series of short messages against the nations surrounding Israel. That wasn't uncommon; normally a prophet would spend his time preaching to Israel, the nation that had made a covenant to serve the Lord, but on occasion a prophet would expand his jurisdiction a bit to comment on what was going on in some of the other nations in the region, whether they knew anything about Israel's God or not. So Amos works his way around all of the nations that border Israel and preaches against their sins, and some of them are guilty of really awful things.

Many of them are guilty of atrocities in battle. Damascus attacked Israelite land with particular ferocity, as though they “threshed” it with “sledges of iron.” Gaza and Tyre are guilty of destroying entire communities by taking them wholesale into captivity and selling them as slaves. Tyre and Edom are guilty of breaking treaties, which in that culture would be pretty abhorrent. Ammon is guilty of attacking Israel with such brutality that they did not even spare pregnant women. Moab is guilty of desecrating the bones of another nation’s king. Some of those sins are more appalling to us than others, but none of them are good.

And then Amos gets to God’s people. He has an oracle for the tribes of Israel, too, organized into Judah in the south and Israel in the north. For Judah, his complaint is that they have “rejected the law of the Lord” and have been “led astray by false gods.” For Israel, his complaint is that they have oppressed the poor in their midst: “they sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.” That always struck me as not quite in the same league as the other sins he’s listed. I mean, looking at this from the standpoint of a preacher, if you’re structuring a sermon, you want to start small and build up to the bigger, more powerful points. You don’t start with the big sins and then go to the little ones, because that’s a letdown for the audience. You build the tension, you don’t let it out. So going from supremely violent acts like destroying entire towns and desecrating bodies and murdering pregnant women to practicing idolatry and oppressing the poor seems like a poor choice on Amos’s part; surely the sins of Israel and Judah aren’t that bad in comparison.

But apparently God does not agree, and I don’t think that’s because, as some people try to claim, all sin is equally bad in God’s eyes, whether it’s stealing a pack of gum or burning down an orphanage. Apparently we are meant to read this as a list of escalating sins, because the rest of the book is spent focusing on the depths of Israel’s sin and the consequences they face. God takes this very seriously. And while it’s certainly true that God is revealed throughout the Bible as being an advocate for the poor and a father to the fatherless and particularly caring about those who are marginalized and oppressed, there’s a deeper issue at work here.

What really gets God angry is arrogance and pride from those who have received grace. It is a terrible thing in God’s eyes to so lose one’s perspective that a person would forget the grace shown to them and lay claim to the glory for a gift that was given by God. To think that I have so earned what I have that I now think I am deserving of it, and I am justified in treating the poor as being less than I am, is a horrible thing in God’s eyes because it claims the grace and mercy of God for one’s self. It’s certainly a bad thing for the other nations to do what they did, but they don’t know God so you can’t expect them to be godly, and they’ll certainly pay the price for their choices. But to know better, to know of the grace of God and claim it for yourself, and to view that grace as something you deserve is more than just wrong, it’s insulting to God.

Oppressing the poor and living in luxury while there are people suffering right outside the door is just one way this is put into practice, but there are others. Amos’s sermons reach something of a climax in the passage we read for today. The humble, earthy obedience of Amos comes head to head with the power and arrogance of a wayward king. Amos is preaching against the abuses taking place in the nation’s worship, and he’s interrupted by the priest of the sanctuary, who tells him to shut up and go home, because “this is the king’s temple.” And as we read, Amos does not respond

well. Such a king with such arrogance as to take the worship of God and pervert it into a political tool is abhorrent to God.

And this is why this arrogance and this wandering from God when we know better is at the top of the list of sins Amos preaches against. Pride is at the root of so many other evils, not just among those outside the church, but those inside the church, too. We take the things of God and claim them for our own purposes, and we go on the offensive against anyone who might threaten our claim and try to restore God's rightful Lordship. "This is the *king's* temple." We see it in national politics whenever Christians think they can gain power, we see it in denominational politics, we see it in local church politics, and we see it in our own lives.

It's one of the key concepts of the kingdom of God, that if we are to be faithful to God, we must examine our lives and see what there is that we're holding back from Him or claiming for ourselves that ought to be given over to Him. And along with that, like Amos, whenever we are bold enough to preach the coming of the kingdom of God and call people to repentance, there will be opposition. That's always been true among God's people. It was certainly true of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus who prepared the way. Like Amos, he did not hold back in pointing out the ways in which the people of his time were dishonoring God through their conduct and their attitudes, and also like Amos, he challenged the king. Only for John, things didn't turn out so well. He didn't just get told off, he got his head removed when he got pulled into palace intrigue. How dare he question the king's prerogative? The kingdom of God might be at hand, but surely the king doesn't have to listen to that. And while none of us may be as bad as King Herod, we still set ourselves up as little kings.

But while Amos does a good job of setting the depth of our sin in its proper perspective, one of the great things about his preaching is how he also sets the greatness of God in its perspective, too. There are a few places where in the middle of his preaching, right in the middle of a message about something, he shifts our focus to the vastness and the wild beauty of God's power, wilder and more vast than the stretches of space between here and Pluto. Right in the middle of preaching about how "there are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness on the ground," Amos almost breaks into song about the greatness of God: "He who made the Pleiades and Orion, who turns midnight into dawn and darkens day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land — the Lord is His name. With a blinding flash He destroys the stronghold and brings the fortified city to ruin."

He does that a couple of times, right in the middle of calling people out for their pettiness and their shallowness and their silly arrogance, he points us to the surpassing greatness of God. It's a shift in perspective. You can't think you're all that great when you're looking at that kind of God. Being a king on this earth seems pretty paltry when compared to the king of the universe.

I was thinking recently about why we go to church. What's the point of it all? Why would people want to bother with all the strange things the church does when they have so many better things to do? Of course I think there are many reasons, but one of them is illustrated here for us in the book of Amos today. The church is one of the only places in the world that tells people the truth that we're all screwed up, that we're not perfect, that we are fallen from what we were meant to be. And more than that, the church tells people the truth that there is real hope. There is a higher perspective of a God who is really worth worshipping, and there is a better way to live than being

deluded in your arrogant pride. So today as our perspective is shifted upward, examine yourself and see: is there any area of your life that you are claiming for your own glory, and that should instead be given to God?



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)