

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 10 – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85:8-13; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

ACNA Readings – Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85; Ephesians 1:1-23; Mark 6:7-13

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). Then there is a large section in the middle called ordinary time. This season often focuses on the growth of the Church, ending in a season known as Kingdome tide which concludes with the feast of Christ the king. During this time we read and hear the bulk of the teachings of Jesus in relation to the kingdom of heaven and how we are called to live as disciples of the Messiah.²

Common Theme. History is a series of events with actions of individuals, nations, and states having consequences whose results ultimately lead to more actions (or reactions) and so forth. It's a rather simplistic overview of history but it does contain the kernel of truth that there are real and lasting consequences to actions. The readings this week present the Biblical truth that you reap what you sow.

Hebraic Perspective. The phrase 'you reap what you sow' has been used to describe the cause and effect nature of our choices. Although, linguistically, the phrase is agricultural—'to reap' is to gather in crops and 'to sow' is to plant them as seeds—the term 'to reap what you sow' seems to have begun as a religious proverb. This everyday farming action became a Biblical metaphor for describing the results of much of human activity, both the positive and the negative.

For example, in the negative sense, the prophet Hosea 8:7 used the term "For they sow the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind" in talking about the consequences of Israel's descent into idolatry.³ Before people claim this is only an 'Old Testament' understanding of consequences and actions, Paul the Apostle clearly uses the terms in Galatians 6:7-8 "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." Here Paul used the term in a very spiritual sense and it is still relevant for the Church today.

In Jewish tradition, actions have consequences that can have generational effects. In retelling the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5:9-10 the Lord Himself acknowledged that some transgressions, such as idolatry, continue to affect up to the 3rd and 4th generations, whilst the

¹ Alternative RCL Reading: II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24

² Usually from the Synoptic Gospels. This year, year B, the Gospel of Mark is studied. We also study passages with similar themes to the Gospel or go through several books of the Bible (largely from I Samuel-I Kings and the writings from Proverbs, Job, and Ruth in the Alternate reading of year B).

³ In Hosea 10:12-13 the phrase is used for both good and bad, "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love... You have plowed iniquity; you have reaped injustice..."

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benefits of obedience and good actions last much longer; “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” This is the foundation of Paul's thoughts in Romans 11:28 where the fruit of the patriarchs is seen in God's love for the Jewish people.

Reaping and sowing is a powerful Biblical concept that can span time. Knowing this, we should endeavour to guard our actions, watch our tongue and imitate Jesus all the more, understanding that the people we affect may yet be unborn.

Amos 7:7-15.⁴ Amos himself declared that he had no particular prophetic upbringing, yet he was still called to be a prophet. In keeping with the theme of consequences to actions, Amos began his career as a shepherd and tender of sycamore-fig trees.⁵ Perhaps it was because Amos was being faithful in tending flocks and agriculture that God called him to faithfully proclaim the Word of the Lord.⁶

God dictated to Amos what would soon take place in the land and to her people. In Amos 7, Amos is given three visions. After the first two visions Amos pleaded that God would relent. But following the third vision, God once again spoke toward what would happen. Rather than simply forming locusts to destroy the agriculture of Israel or calling a fire upon the land, God Himself would stand in the midst of Israel next to a hardened wall with a sword for judgment.⁷

⁴ Amos was a contemporary of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah, and although originally from Tekoa in Judah, his ministry was in the northern kingdom of Israel.

⁵ Sycamore in Hebrew is שִׁקְמָה *Shikma* which is derived from the verb לְשַׁקֵּם *L'Shakem* meaning to restore. שִׁקְמָה means sycamore as well as restore. The book of Amos describes the judgment and exile to befall Israel but also the future restoration of Israel, Amos 9:13-15.

⁶ For millennia the ancient profession of the shepherd was thought of quite highly and became a major metaphor for the characteristic of compassionate leadership. All the patriarchs of the Jewish people were shepherds, along with many of their greatest leaders—from Abraham to Moses and David. There was something about faithfully shepherding that produced good biblical leaders.

⁷ Many English translations state that the wall is made with a plumb line. However, the term for plumb line (אָנָה, *anak*) is only used these four times in the Bible, all in Amos 7:7-8, and there is no context for the word outside of, perhaps, it being a loanword from Akkadian (*annaku*, tin). Modern Hebrew uses the word אָנָה (*anak*) for a perpendicular line, such as the line used to tell depth in waters or for construction—a plumb line. But this was a late Hebrew interpretation from the late 10th to mid-11th century derived from a phonological argument out of the Arabic. Another Biblical word is commonly used for such a line, קָו (qav) such as in II Kings 21:13, Job 38:5, Isaiah 44:13, and, perhaps most similar to Amos 7:7-8, Lamentations 2:8.

The Septuagint also used a Greek word that only appeared four times in the LXX, all in Amos 7:7-8, ἀδάμας (*adamas*, from which we get adamantium and diamond) to translate אָנָה (*anak*). The Vulgate, meanwhile, translated the word as a mason's trowel (*trullam cementarii*). Finally, the Aramaic Targum

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Israel had been experiencing a period of relative prosperity but also a serious spiritual decline in observing God's law. The centres of idolatry in Bethel and Dan continued to lead Israel away from the Lord. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel,⁸ used the word of God to try to force Amos out of the northern kingdom and back to his homeland in Judah. Rather than repenting from the coming judgment, Amos was told to go into exile. The consequence of not repenting would be the impending Assyrian invasion and exile of Israel—the king's sanctuary and temple of Israel would be laid to waste.⁹ This same message runs concurrent through both the ministries of Hosea and Isaiah.

Psalm 85:8-13.^{10 11} The specific history of Psalm 85 is unclear. It could have been written at almost any point in Israel's history—for people sin and God speaks (sometimes with anger). But God's people, the saints, also listened to God when He spoke and God would forgive. However, the close connection between the forgiveness of the people and restoration of the land may point towards this being a Psalm after the exile or, like Solomon's prayer at the dedication (II Chronicles 26:24-42), prophetic regarding the possibility of a future exile.

Pseudo-Jonathan interpreted אַך (anak) as דין (din) judgment. Historically, there was no full consensus on how to translate the word although today most scholars accept the Akkadian loan-word theory. However, the meaning of Amos 7:7-9 does have some consensus.

In *Bava Metzia* 59a.7 Rav Hisda and Rabbi Elazar use wordplay between אַך (anak) and אונאה (ona'ah) to state that God will punish most sins through His agents but mistreatment of people is punished directly by God. Dr. Tania Notarius, *Amos' Puns in the Northern (Israelite) Dialect*, believes that Amos (a southerner) was using dialectical variation between Judah and Israel (with Canaanite/Akkadian influence) to make a pun between "tin" אַך anak or anak (with a canaanite shift) and "I myself" אנוכי anoki. Again, this emphasized that God Himself would be involved in the judgment.

⁸ Bethel was not a Levitical city. Instead, it (along with Dan in the far north) was the cultic site that Israel used to combat the Temple worship of God in Jerusalem (Amos 7:13).

⁹ Interestingly, and possibly quite uniquely, Amos not only speaks of Jacob, or Israel, as a metaphor for the nation of Israel but also references Isaac as a stand-in for the nation of Israel (Amos 7:9, 16). Bethel is well known as being the high place of Jacob, or Israel. The high place of Isaac, however, was Beersheva (Genesis 26:25), which is in the far south of Judah. The consequences of rebellion would not only be in the capital and false temples of Israel.

¹⁰ ACNA Reading: Psalm 85

¹¹ Psalm 85 is attributed to the sons of Korah who, according to the title of the Psalm, prepared worship material for the 'chief musician'. The history of the sons of Korah is an excellent example of redemption, forgiveness and inclusion back into the family of God. Korah was a levite during the wandering in the wilderness whose tasks included the carrying of the Ark of the Covenant when the community moved. Korah joined in the rebellion against Moses, earning the wrath of God, with the earth swallowing the rebels. His descendants did not follow in their fathers rebellious footsteps but returned to faithful service in the Tabernacle (Samuel) and later the Temple as worship leaders.

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In the Scriptures, Israel is both a people and a land and the two are inextricably linked.¹² While the whole earth is the Lord's, the opening line references Israel as "your land." Psalm 85:2 then paired the land of Israel with the people of Israel, to whom God had shown forgiveness. The exile was the painful, but promised, consequence of a spiritual falling away from God. Israel had embraced foreign gods and broken His covenant. The consequence, for there are always consequences for every action (sometimes good, sometimes bad), was Assyrian captivity and, later, Babylonian exile for Judah.

This might have tempted the people of Israel to hopelessly abandon the Lord forever. But if not listening to God had caused the exile from the land, not listening to God after the exile would be folly. The psalm sends a message of hope that, for the people of God, salvation is near, and that the Lord will come and dwell in the land.

From verse 8, the psalmist expressed the desire to submit to the Lord. He did this by hearing God speak. Repentance brings a renewed and restored relationship with God, this includes His presence. The Lord's presence once more in the land would bring further blessings. Loving kindness and truth are paired with righteousness and peace, which poetically meet together with passion, described in the psalm as a kiss. Truth, sometimes translated as faithfulness,¹³ even springs from the earth as concurrently righteousness descends from heaven. The psalm concludes with an exhortation for preparation. In this case, it is righteousness that descends from heaven that prepares the way for the Lord. The exhortation to prepare comes from heaven.

¹² A significant part of the identity of the Jewish people is through the ancient connection with the land of Israel. From the beginning, Abraham's call (which included being a blessing to the nations) involved the leaving of one land to go to another land—a land for him and his descendants. The spiritual well-being of the people of Israel is often connected to the health of the land by the prophets and in the prayer life of the Jewish people in the psalms many times as well as in the *Sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 6-11). Jesus also has a connection to the land as part of His Jewish identity as a literal descendent of Abraham.

¹³ Many translations interpret truth (אמת) as faithfulness (אמונה) here. While they have a similar shoresh (root), truth is a better interpretation and is also how the LXX translated it (αληθεια). However, both interpretations convey similar meanings as faithfulness is the action of being true or steadfast.

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Our response, from the earth,¹⁴ to that call brings blessing of truth, mercy and, above all, the presence of the Lord.

Ephesians 1:3-14.¹⁵ The way Jewish people prayed invariably started with a blessing of God, “Blessed are you, O LORD our God, King of the universe.”¹⁶ Paul started his introductory sentence by speaking about blessings. The first word, εὐλογητός (Eulogétos) “blessed”, is used

¹⁴ Three things meet in Psalm 85:10-11 (11-12 in the Hebrew). First is steadfast love and truth. A very common phrase that appears together 25 times in the Tanakh. If we have mercy God will be true and if we are true God will have mercy. Righteousness and peace kiss. If we are righteous (often interpreted as charity) then peace will come. And if we are at peace, God will be charitable.

The third is that truth and righteousness meet—truth springing up from the ground while righteousness looks down from the heavens. We know that God looks down (שִׁקָּף) in judgment—first in Genesis 18:16 and 19:28 the angels and then Abraham looked down to see Sodom's fall; more explicitly, in Exodus 14:24, the LORD looked down on the army of the Egyptians. In Psalm 14:2 and 53:2 God once again looks down to earth to see if any seek after Him. But God also looks down in mercy. Psalm 102:19 states that God looks down and hears the groaning of the prisoner while in Deuteronomy 26:15 Israel is to pray that God would look down on them and bless His people. (As we have seen earlier, the blessing involves Israel, the people, directly with the land that God had promised them—the land flowing with milk and honey. Even as Psalm 85:12 also includes the land as part of God's blessing for doing what is good.)

But what of truthfulness springing from the earth? Is it of God? Of men? Of Israel? Truth and righteousness appear together in several different contexts:

In I Kings 3:6, Solomon declared that God showed great benevolence towards David in response to David's truth and righteousness. Here David was true and righteous.

Isaiah 48:1 declared that Israel was deceiving themselves. They called on God, but did so without truth or righteousness. Here a nation was neither true nor righteous.

Jeremiah 4:1-2 declared that Israel can return. They can call on God, but this time in truth and righteousness. Here a nation was called to be true and righteous.

Zechariah 8:8 speaks of God bringing His people [back] to Jerusalem to renew the purpose of the Exodus—that Israel would be God's people and God would be their God in truth and righteousness. Here God is true and righteous.

The first time we encounter something wishing to sprout (צִמְחָה) up from the ground is in Genesis 2:5. No plant could spring up from the earth for God hadn't sent His blessing, His rain, to the earth. Isaiah 45:8 makes it clear that it is the LORD who created the righteousness that pours down from the heavens and the earth it pours down on. But Genesis 2:5 reminds us that the other reason no plant could spring up was that there was no man to cultivate the ground. Isaiah 45:8 also states that God's righteousness and salvation should bear fruit and righteousness should sprout—So we get the picture that God and man work together. God is true and righteous, obviously we, as his people, are also called to be true and righteous.

¹⁵ ACNA Reading: Ephesians 1:1-23

¹⁶ In Hebrew, one could pray ברוך אתה אדוני (Blessed are you God) or even אבינו שבשמיים (Our Father in Heaven). Paul seems to use both concepts in speaking of God.

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only of God, for He alone is blessed. What follows is a list of the many blessings God provides for those who belong to Him by faith.¹⁷

Many times, we believe that blessings are natural or even something we ourselves are the originators of but Paul used three different forms of the word and in each case it is God who is the originator: God is blessed (adjective, describing God); God has blessed us (active verb); and God gave us His spiritual blessing (noun).¹⁸

The blessings of the Lord are not simply earthly and temporal, where they can be lost or taken away.¹⁹ Paul is writing of our “spiritual blessings” that pertain to the heavenly realms and therefore are a higher and superior form of blessing. Before there even was a temporal world, we were known by God and chosen by him. God acted out His redemption in His creation through the blood of the Messiah and now we have become part of that mysterious commonwealth of Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

It is very comforting to know that believers are chosen by God, not at random, but by His good pleasure. We are not an afterthought or were mistakenly saved. Our salvation is a deliberate and thoughtful action by God. The Lord's actions on our behalf have profound consequences. His washing us in the blood of Jesus and sealing us with the Holy Spirit causes us to both be holy (salvation by faith) and blameless (holiness in our actions) before Him.

Hebraic Context. The death of Alexander of Macedon (a.k.a ‘the Great’) led to the breakup of his fledgling empire as his former generals turned on each other—vying for power and supremacy. Ptolemy secured control of Egypt while Seleucus took Syria and Asia Minor. In the middle was the land of Israel.

¹⁷ Ephesians 1:3-14 is a single sentence that should not be separated but understood within the subject matter of God's many blessings.

¹⁸ This isn't to say that we can't also bless God. Blessings are real and tangible (whether physical or spiritual)—often based on actions (as shown in Ephesians 1:3-14). To bless God we act in ways that will bless Him. Deuteronomy 8:10 says that after we have eaten and are satisfied, we should bless the LORD. How do we bless God? Through our words only? No, by keeping His commandments, remembering all the blessings He has given us (like the food we have just eaten), by fearing the LORD our God, and serving Him—holding fast to Him. David in Psalm 103:21, after commanding his soul to bless the LORD and then listing all the ways that God blessed us, states “Bless the LORD, all His hosts, His ministers, who do His will.” If we do not do the will of God, all the words of blessing, grace, and before dinner prayers (where, for some reason, it has become tradition to bless the food rather than the God who gave the food) will be no blessing of God but a word that God hates.

However, Paul, in Ephesians 1:3-14, is focusing on all the blessings of God and will only state what our reaction to God's blessing should be later in his letter.

¹⁹ Although God has given us many earthly blessings.

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Judah had been semi autonomous since the release from exile under Cyrus the Persian (also 'the Great'). However, many Jewish people became seduced by the virtues (and excesses) of Hellenism. Nonetheless, not everyone was comfortable with cultural assimilation. As forced assimilation and the imposition of Greek culture and religion came in conflict with the Jewish identity of obedience to a single God there were bound to be consequences. Interestingly enough, it wasn't the mighty empire that won but a small family of priests who led a successful rebellion against Greek gods, culture, and armies—the Hasmoneans. Subsequently the Jewish people forged an independent kingdom almost the size of Solomon's. Today this war of independence is remembered and celebrated with the Jewish winter festival of Hanukkah.

Unfortunately, it did not take long for rival factions to develop within the Hasmonean dynasty. The consequences of Hasmonean infighting resulted in Roman occupation under general Pompey in 63 BC and the declaration by the Roman Senate that Herod (soon to also be 'the Great') should rule as king in Judea—which finally became a Roman province in 6 AD. The Herodian dynasty appears frequently in the gospels and the book of Acts and it was never in a positive light (for instance, the death of John the Baptist or concession for Jesus' death on the cross). Their presence at the time of Jesus was a result of poor choices several generations prior.

Mark 6:14-29. The Gospel portion opens noting that there was some confusion as to the identity of Jesus in the Jewish world. His own hometown knew him to be a carpenter's son. Jesus' healings, deliverances from demons, and teachings had others speculating that he was Elijah—who prophecy said was to appear before the Messiah—or one of various other figures and prophets.²⁰ There was much conjecture as to who would appear leading up to the days of the Messiah. Yet few in the text seemed to have considered Jesus to actually be the Messiah. Despite hailing from the line of David, from which will come the redeemer, most rather thought Jesus to be part of the prophetic line. Meanwhile, king Herod feared Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist.²¹

²⁰ For instance, II Maccabees 15:12-16 shares the appearance of another of the dead prophets after his death as Jeremiah came to give Judas a golden sword during the Maccabean revolt

²¹ Resurrection was a common doctrine of discussion in the 2nd Temple period. Though the Scriptures did not speak much on the topic, there were occasional glimpses of the possibility of a resurrection (Gen 5:24; Num 16:33; 1 Sam 2:6; 28:8–19; 2 Kgs 2:11; Isa 26:19; Ezek 37:1–14; Prov 12:28) and Daniel 12:1-3 is even explicit about the resurrection.

By the time of II Maccabees, the resurrection wasn't only a theoretical doctrine but was a strong enough belief for many Jewish followers of God to willingly die, believing He would raise them in the world to come. The exact form of resurrection was still debated, whether between Pharisees or Essenes and even Sadducees (who didn't believe in the resurrection). By the time *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 10.1 was written, they stated, "All of the Jewish people, even sinners... have a share in the World-to-Come." But there were a few exceptions, namely, "One who says: 'There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah.'"

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The Herodian dynasty was replete with many monarchs called Herod, and it can get confusing as to which Herod was being referred to in the Gospels. The Herod who was involved with the beheading of John the Baptist was Herod Antipas. He had divorced his wife Phasaelis, the daughter of a Nabatean king called Aretas, and married Herodias, his half-brother's wife. This later resulted in a disastrous war between Rome and Judah against the insulted Nabateans, in which Antipas lost Damascus to Aretas, a very ill-fated consequence of Herod's actions. John the Baptist challenged the illegitimate relationship and was arrested for his constant condemnation of Herod and Herodias. A consequence of speaking the truth is not always smooth sailing. Herod's careless tongue produced deadly fruit when it delivered a vague promise that, with clever manipulation by Herodias, resulted in John's execution.

ACNA Readings

Mark 6:7-13. Following the rejection Jesus faced in his hometown of Nazareth, He gathered His disciples and sent them out in pairs. The text deliberately notes it is the 12 disciples that He sent. It is quite possible that Jesus actually had more followers, including female disciples, and that here Jesus is setting a special task for the inner circle of "the twelve" and imbuing them with His authority.²²

They are armed with very limited resources: no bag, no bread, and no money. This goes against almost every missionary practice done today. Today, when we want to send people out on the mission field, we draw up budgets, we spend time fundraising, we prepare by learning the local dialects and traditions. The disciples really only had two options: obey their master and His instructions and go, or not.

They chose to obey. And they did have one resource, the authority of their master. As such, they preached repentance, healed the sick, and drove out demons. Those that offered them the proper hospitality would gain the fellowship of the disciples for the whole time they preached in that location. The consequence for not providing assistance or not responding to the message of repentance would be some eschatological abhorrence on the day of judgment worse than that wrought against Sodom and Gomorrah.²³ That might seem like quite a harsh judgment from Jesus. However, the principle of action and consequence has grave spiritual repercussions when it pertains to rejecting Jesus as Lord and Saviour. You do not *have* to believe in Jesus, but there *is* a consequence for not doing so.

²² In Luke 9:1-6 Jesus sent out the 12 but already in Luke 10 sent out 72 (or 70). However, while Matthew 10, Mark 6, and Luke 9 all state that Jesus gave authority to the 12, it does not state He gave authority to the 72 in Luke 10:1-12. They did, however, see the result of their obedience just as the 12 did (Luke 10:17-18) at which point they too were given authority (Luke 10:19)

²³ Matthew 10:15; Also, in the case of the 72, in Luke 10:11-12

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