

## Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 23 – Year B

**RCL Readings**<sup>1</sup> – Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90:12-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

**ACNA Readings** – Amos 5:6-15; Psalm 90:1-17; Hebrews 3:1-6; Mark 10:17-31

**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.

**Common Theme.** Unfortunately, we cannot remain innocent children forever. As we start to grow into our youth we can either be lulled by our own strength and health or encounter the grim reality of pain and suffering in our world. As we become adults, we can be deceived by our great wealth or despair at our poverty. But invariably, we start to see something as more important than listening to God, obeying God, and following God. But all we have on earth is temporary; God should be our dwelling place forever.

**Amos 5:6-7, 10-15.**<sup>2</sup> Israel had a great history—times and places where God met Israel and Israel came to meet with God. God met Jacob at Bethel and God promised Jacob there that the land of Canaan would belong to his descendants. And so it was that the land, from Dan to Beersheba (where the patriarchs so often lived), became Israel. As the people under Joshua came into the land, they set up a memorial at Gilgal to remember all that God had done, “that you may fear the LORD your God forever.” Memorials are only useful so long as they point towards the reason the place was memorialized. Unfortunately, these very places that should have been reminders of the obedience God called them to live in and be blessed by became cultic sites of idolatry.

Amos called on Israel to seek God and live. But, rather than seeking God and living, the people went to Bethel and Gilgal and worshiped God wrongly or even a different god. Amos wasn't speaking to a pagan nation but to the people of God. And yet the people of God were not behaving as the people of God. And so Amos delivered a command along with stern warning from God. The warning for not following the commandment should have caused great fear but there was also the hope of redemption and life should they heed the warning.

Who are they to seek? The LORD, maker of the stars, the sun and moon. The one who rules over the waters and the earth. Two constellations were specifically mentioned as being created, the Pleiades and Orion.<sup>3</sup> In the ancient world it was not uncommon for cultures to worship the

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<sup>1</sup> Alternate RCL Readings: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15

<sup>2</sup> ACNA includes Amos 5:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 147:4 states that God not only chose how many stars to create but also named them. Although the Bible doesn't name them often, Orion is mentioned in Job 9:9, 38:31; Isaiah 13:10; and Amos 5:8. The

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constellations as divine beings. Often the sun was the centre of worship and even the Israelites, in periods of idolatry, would prostrate themselves eastward towards the sun.<sup>4</sup> The Scriptures are clear that star worship is, of course, foolish and inappropriate as the Lord is the maker and namer of stars. The prophets are clear that there are severe consequences for worshipping the creation over the Creator.

Having established who Israel should turn to, and what Israel should not turn to, Amos directed his reproach towards those who oppress and cause others to suffer. The house of Israel oppressed the righteous and deprived the poor of justice—they weren't the righteous ones who were being oppressed. It was the house of Joseph that God would break out against with fire.<sup>5</sup> There was a way to live though: Seek God instead of empty worship or idolatry and seek good and not evil. Instead of oppressing the righteous and the poor, do justice at the gate and walk humbly after God.

**Psalm 90:12-17.**<sup>6</sup> Psalm 90 is the only psalm to have been attributed to Moses, “The man of God.”<sup>7</sup> Moses has a unique position of both having met the LORD face to face and leading the people of Israel through the wilderness for forty years until all those who had disobeyed the Lord died in their wanderings. The psalm ponders some of the consequences to our actions and that some suffering is a result of “our secret sins”, all of which eventually come to light. The correct response to sin is to repent. According to Jewish sages, God knew that we would sin and so made a way to repent—to return to God.<sup>8</sup> And so, while we might be engulfed in disasters of our own making (which in turn would cause others to also suffer) God already told us to repent. God already provided the solution.

The journey through the wilderness could not have been an easy one for the people of Israel. There were legitimate problems that they had to face, lack of water and food and the desert has many hardships beyond even that. And so the people of Israel complained. They bickered and disputed with one another, often needing adjudication from Moses before both God and man. But just because the people had disobeyed God and weren't allowed to enter the promised land didn't mean that they were left alone in the wilderness. God provided water and manna in the

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Hebrew name for Orion is כסיל (*kesil*). However, the homonym, also כסיל, is regularly used to speak of the foolish in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

<sup>4</sup> See Ezekiel 8:16-18

<sup>5</sup> Why did Amos specifically pick the house of Joseph? Ephraim and Manasseh often dominated the political world of Israel and in several places the prophets used Israel, Ephraim, or the house of Joseph interchangeably. Joseph, perhaps, represented the perceived wealth, power, and security of Israel.

<sup>6</sup> ACNA includes Psalm 90:1-11

<sup>7</sup> The title “The man of God” was given to Moses throughout the Scripture, see Deuteronomy 33:1; Joshua 14:6; Ezra 3:2. Only a few people were given this title or description, such as Samuel and Elijah, along with the prophet Shemaiah and another unnamed prophet and finally the priest (or Levite) Igdaliah.

<sup>8</sup> See Hebraic Perspective

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wilderness. He also kept their equipment from wearing out on the road. And, most importantly, the presence of God was with them each day—a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire.

Moses in his prayer recognized the transitory and brief nature of our existence and that our sins and failings are only too visible in the sight of the Lord. Moses contrasted the mortality of man with the immortality of God. However, in acknowledging our mortality, we can still be satisfied with all that God gives us and make the best use of the time that we have been given. And anything we do, for it to last, must be established by an immortal God, nor simply come from mortal hands.

The Tabernacle and Temple were both extremely important to the people of Israel (and to God). “There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat... I will speak with you.” Both were built by human hands and both were destroyed, multiple times in the case of the Temple. But Moses declared that God has “been our dwelling place in all generations.” God dwells among us, but we too can dwell in God, no matter where we might be.

**Hebrews 4:12-16.** The Word of God is alive and active, or as described by the author of Hebrews; “sharper than any two edged sword”. The “Word” here could be referring to both the Holy Scriptures and also the “Living Word”, that being the Messiah.<sup>9</sup> The words of God, based on the Scriptures, are incredibly powerful. When God spoke at Mount Sinai, the Israelites could not bear it and asked Moses to intercede and speak to the Lord on their behalf. According to oral tradition, the voice of the Lord caused the Israelites to be overwhelmed by ecstasy of pure joy, at the same time deeply aware of their unrighteous nature and thus also filled with dread.

When reading the Bible, the Word of God continues to expose to us the fallen human condition and reveals our need for redemption. Truth is not an easy commodity to come by in our modern world. However, God's Word reveals the truth of human history—and of ourselves (even if we don't want to see it!) Hebrews reminds us that “all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”

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<sup>9</sup> The connection between words (the word of God in particular), a sword, and the Messiah is found not only in the Bible but also in intertestamental literature. The connection in Psalm 149:6 is somewhat loose, “Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands to execute vengeance on the nations...” However, in Isaiah 49 the servant declared, “He made my mouth like a sharp sword.” The connection between the Messiah, the Word of God, and a sword was established and so, in the second Temple period, the Book of Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon) 18:15-16 stated, “Your all-powerful word from heaven's royal throne leapt into the doomed land, a fierce warrior bearing the sharp sword of your inexorable decree...” Revelation 1:16 similarly compared one “like a son of man” (see Daniel 7) from whose mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. This figure was Jesus the Messiah.

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Hebrews immediately transitioned from the word of God to the great high priest, Jesus the Son of God.<sup>10</sup> The living Word also refers to the Messiah, Jesus the great High Priest who has passed through the heavens.<sup>11</sup> The Messiah, Jesus, knows our disobedience as nothing is hid from Him and is the judge to whom we must give account. But He also knows our temptations and sympathizes with our weakness, to give us mercy and grace when we strive to hold fast. The judge and the judgment are real, but so are the mercy and grace that can be found in the risen Messiah.

**Hebraic Context.** The people of Israel were understandably proud of the temple, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” The temple represented a centralization of Israelite worship and communal gatherings. Here the word of the Lord was proclaimed. God’s name and glory were attached to a place, the holy mountain of God. However, this was the second temple. The great Temple of Solomon had been destroyed. Even before the temple of Solomon was destroyed, the place where the Tabernacle had once kept had been sacked and demolished by the Philistines.<sup>12</sup>

The theological question for the Jewish sages was, why? Why would the Lord allow the place where His name, His honour, and glory were attached to be destroyed at the hands of pagan Gentiles? They would, naturally, think that their gods were more powerful than the living God. After the destruction of Solomon’s temple, the exile to Babylon prompted a deep theological introspection as to the reasons for the temple’s fall.

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<sup>10</sup> Jesus is only called a High Priest in the Epistle of Hebrews. In fact, outside of Israel being a kingdom of priests, no direct connection between Jesus and the priesthood is made. Levitical priests trace their lineage through the tribe of Levi. Being a descendant of Judah actually disqualifies Jesus from the priesthood on earth. However, the author of Hebrews would later quote Psalm 110:4 in order to make an eschatological and messianic argument. Jesus would not be a Levitical priest, for He could not be, instead He would serve as a High Priest according to a non-Levitical priesthood—the priesthood of Melchizedek.

<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew Bible records only a few righteous people who ascended into heaven, namely Enoch and Elijah. While Paul elaborated on Jesus’ ascent and descent from Heaven, here the book of Hebrews focused more on Jesus’ time on earth where he was “tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

<sup>12</sup> God told Israel they were to “seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put His name and make His habitation there.” But neither God nor Moses told them where God’s habitation would be. The Tabernacle was first set up in Shiloh of Ephraim after Joshua and the people were able to conquer Canaan. It stayed there until the time of Eli and Samuel. However, according to Jeremiah and archaeological studies, the Philistines didn’t stop when they took the Ark of the Covenant but proceeded to go to Shiloh itself where they sacked Shiloh and the Tabernacle—the place where God met the people of Israel. Only in the Psalms does David return to the writing of Moses and declare that Jerusalem was the place that God had chosen. And from the time of Samuel until Solomon there were only temporary dwelling places for the Arc of the Covenant.

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The Israelites acknowledged they had forsaken the Lord and that they were guilty of idol worship.<sup>13</sup> Upon returning from Babylon idolatry was never a major issue again. The second temple in Jerusalem could have easily been considered one of the ancient wonders of the world.<sup>14</sup> The Temple Mount is quite large, roughly 37 acres. In comparison, the Acropolis of Athens was 7.4 acres. The Jewish temple was not only beautiful, with great riches, but the true wonder of the Jewish temple was that you would not find a single statue without or within.

Unfortunately, the diaspora had brought on a new and more subtle problem for Israel—greed! Jeremiah had told the exiles to settle in Babylon, construct houses, and plant crops. The Israelites engaged in hard work and thrived in the new lands that they had been brought to. When given the opportunity to return to Jerusalem by the decree of Cyrus one estimate was that only 5-10% of the Jewish people did so originally.<sup>15</sup> Success had brought wealth and wealth had brought a host of new issues for the people of God.<sup>16</sup>

In the New Testament Jesus did not have to teach about idolatry (that would be left to Paul to discuss with his gentile audience in the epistles). Jesus and the gospel writers were more concerned with money or mammon, and so we see Jesus teach several parables of the correct use of wealth and talents. Like today's gospel passage Jesus has several encounters with the rich whose wealth had become a hindrance to truly loving the Lord and following Him above all earthly things.

**Mark 10:17-31.** The conversation between an unnamed, rich man and Jesus appears in all the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>17</sup> From the gospel passage we can ascertain that the rich man both knew

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<sup>13</sup> The Talmud, in *Yoma* 9b, described the traditional theological reason for the destruction of the Temple, “Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because the three cardinal sins were rampant in society: idol worship, licentiousness, and murder.”

<sup>14</sup> While the second temple was recorded as not nearing the splendour of Solomon's temple (Haggai 2:3), first the Hasmoneans expanded the Temple Mount and then King Herod, not content with anything that might be considered inferior, rebuilt the Temple itself at great expense until even the worst enemies of the Jews proclaimed that it held incredible riches (Tacitus *Histories* 5.8)

<sup>15</sup> Ezra 2:64-65 states that 42,360 Israelites returned when given an opportunity along with an additional 7,337 servants and 200 singers. We have no data for how many Israelites there were total in Persia, Babylon, and Assyria (not to mention Egypt and North Africa among many other places) but the Jewish people remained in many of these locations until they were expelled between 1947 and 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Note that Jeremiah, and God, desired Israel to go and work—to thrive in the land that they would dwell in for a season. They were to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” God's provision of wealth, or health, isn't necessarily the problem. Rather it is a blessing from God. But regarding whether we look to God in thanksgiving and praise or live in contentment or pride in our own life is a choice that too many of us fail.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 19:20, 22 points out that the man was younger, νεανίσκος (*neaniskos*, a young man), while Luke 18:18 points out that the man was also a ruler, ἄρχων (*archōn*, ruler or prince). Ruler, ἄρχων, is used of Nicodemus and Jairus. Nicodemus was likely a member of the Sanhedrin (John 7:50) while Jairus

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God and followed the commandments—he was not ignorant of the Lord. Despite his adherence to the Torah the man still asked Jesus about what to do in order to inherit eternal life. The Scriptures are clear that to love God we must keep His commandments. And yet, this man, despite his obedience from youth, left Jesus despondent after asking how he could inherit eternal life.<sup>18</sup>

Jesus went right to the heart of the issue for the rich man, but not in a harsh, cruel way. Instead, Jesus saw the man with eyes of compassion and love. Jesus knew the inner struggles of the rich man. Yes, the young man had every earthly blessing and was diligent in his observance of the commandments and yet he remained uncertain of his eternal future. The young man's wealth was a hindrance to his entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven. And yet, Jesus knew that the rich man had a serious need and told him that "You lack one thing".

What did the man lack? He had wealth, which Jesus told him to distribute to the poor. But becoming poor wasn't the one thing he lacked. "Come, follow me." The young man obeyed the commandments of God, but he wasn't sure if he was willing to give up his possessions for God. He wasn't sure if he was willing to give up his lifestyle and position for God. Following God wasn't his priority. Because Jesus loved the man, he offered the young man a chance to cast aside the idols that were above God.

The tension between having wealth and following Jesus is wrestled with in all the Gospels. Wealth is often seen as a blessing from God but it can also be a hindrance. So why would God choose to bless us with wealth? Moses said in Deuteronomy 8:18, "You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may confirm His covenant..." Surely God is the source of any material blessing. And yet Paul warned Timothy that, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils." Instead, Paul urged Timothy to "Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, life, steadfastness, gentleness... Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called." Riches can be an amazing blessing, but Jesus' teaching is

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was a ruler of a Synagogue. While being rich as a young man may indicate that the man had a good inheritance from his father, the sons of Rabbi's rarely became Rabbi's themselves as it was not an inherited title but earned and a position in the Sanhedrin would have required both great personal integrity and considerable knowledge—first in the law but also an understanding of languages in order to hear all cases brought forth and the wisdom to apply the law to each case.

<sup>18</sup> The fact that the man was saddened upon hearing Jesus' reply shows that, although he was young and a ruler, he genuinely came to Jesus because he knew that Jesus had authority in His teaching and understood the gravity of both the question and the answer.

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still clear, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>19 20</sup>

**Hebraic Perspective.** As Jewish sages studied every word of the Scriptures in detail they concluded that there were some things that preceded the Creation. The Babylonian Talmud presented a list of things that preceded the events of Genesis 1. “Seven things were created before the world was made, and these are they: Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the throne of glory, the house of the sanctuary, and the name of the Messiah” (Pesach 54a).<sup>21</sup>

Each of the seven things was then given its prooftext from Scripture to reinforce the concept of pre-existence.<sup>22</sup> Repentance, as something that preceded the creation of the world, was sourced from a reading of Psalm 90:2-3 where God commands man to return. The word repentance in Hebrew is תשובה *teshuva* in which the root of the word is שׁוּב *shuv* from the verb ‘to return’. When did God say to man ‘return’? Verse 2 says it was “Before the mountains were born, or you brought forth the whole world”. Thus a possible literal reading of Psalm 90 is that prior to God fashioning the mountains during the creation week He already had the plan of repentance and restoration, “Return, O children of man!”.

Repentance is connected to the idea of returning to something or someplace. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition there is the recognition that everyone sins on occasion and that, while the desire to lead a good life may be present, no one is perfect. Repentance is often the first element of the journey of salvation and atonement. In Christian thought, the idea of repentance is a turning around from the wrong direction that we have been going and turning back to God.

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<sup>19</sup> So many of us have earthly riches and positions for which we can be immensely thankful. But Paul said that you should “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” I have to wonder if it would be good for some of us to ask how we can obtain eternal life. We too follow God's commandments, at least, many of His commandments. So often we pray to God for His blessings—many of which are earthly, in health or in wealth. Neither the gospels nor the traditions of the early church fathers state whether this young man, in the end, decided to follow God and inherited eternal life. We simply don't know what he decided. How many more never even thought to ask, continuing in their own way without thought to whether they would actually inherit eternal life or continue in their idolatry?

<sup>20</sup> I have read suggestions that the eye of the needle was referring to a narrow gate at the city entrance where a camel was stripped of its cargo in order for it to pass through on its knees. While there are, of course, gates that were designed for a single person to enter and exit, I have not seen a single ancient gate or piece of archaeology that supports this theory.

<sup>21</sup> The author of Revelation does something similar when he stated that the beast would have authority over, “...everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.” Or, in the NIV, “All whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.”

<sup>22</sup> For example, the Torah is said to have preceded Genesis as Proverbs 8:22-31 personifies Torah as Wisdom and says; “The Lord brought me forth as the first of His works, before His deeds of old.”

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There is often the thought of repentance being a journey. However in the Hebraic perspective, returning means being back in the same place or state from which you started. For example, if I returned to my house I am now back in my house, not on the journey towards my house.

Repentance then returns us back to the status or relationship that we had with the Lord prior to our departure due to sin. It is not that we have to turn around and walk back to God, rather we are immediately back with Him.

### ACNA Readings

**Hebrews 3:1-6.** The book of Hebrews is the only book that speaks of Jesus as the High Priest and yet this has become a very popular doctrine in the Church.<sup>23</sup> However, the doctrine of Jesus as an apostle (“sent one”) is less known even though Jesus explicitly mentioned that He was sent by God.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus was sent from and by his heavenly Father.<sup>25</sup> Jesus was faithful to the one who had sent Him—He accomplished the tasks for which He was sent. He has also received the rewards for doing so and shared those rewards with us. However, as Jesus was faithful we too are expected to be faithful to the heavenly calling. As Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me even so I am sending you.” This isn’t a simple calling nor is it easy.

The Epistle of Hebrews regularly contrasts Moses and Jesus. Moses was also a faithful servant and a member of the household of God. However, Jesus is greater than Moses, even more so He is the very creator of that household. Through His faithfulness, Jesus is adding more people into the house, which now includes us. The writer of Hebrews admonishes us that we are part of that household, but only if we truly “hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” When we endure suffering, some of the dangers include surrendering our hope to despair and giving up our calling and place as holy brethren in the people of God.

But we aren’t Moses nor are we Jesus. How can we be faithful? How can we avoid giving into despair? By listening to the voice of the one God sent. This is both a personal call and a communal one. As brothers and sisters in the Lord, we need to exhort each other to remain

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<sup>23</sup> See footnote 10

<sup>24</sup> While many liturgies speak of Jesus as High Priest, only a few speak of Jesus as the Apostle of God. One early Eastern liturgy from the Prayer of the Catechumens states, “O Lord our God, who dwellest on high and lookest upon the humble, who hast sent forth as the salvation of the race of men thine only-begotten Son, and God, our Lord Jesus Christ, look upon thy servants the catechumens, who have bowed their necks before thee. Vouchsafe unto them in due time the laver of regeneration, the forgiveness of sins, and the robe of incorruption. Unite them to thy holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and number them with thine elect flock.”

<sup>25</sup> God sent, ἀπεσταλκεν (apestalken) Jesus: John 5:36; I John 4:9, 14; and John 20:21 where, as God sent Jesus, He, in turn, was sending out the disciples.



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faithful, helping each other see the Lord in difficult situations and enduring each other's burdens.  
The reward is too good to miss out on—life everlasting.