

Taking Action for Justice

On Earth as in Heaven: God's Call for Justice 5

The Reverend Renée Marie Rico

Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ

Sunday, November 8, 2020

Amos 5: 18-24, Matthew 25: 1-13

Introduction

The word apocalyptic is one familiar to theologians and philosophers – it means “ending.” We get the word apocalypse and apocalyptic from it. Think “end times” or those movies that feature an asteroid hitting earth. Think Jesus and others predicting the end of the world, or the Revelation of John which describes the end of the earth and a new heaven and earth.

Because we are a people of story, we like beginnings that begin, and endings that end.

“It was the best of times, and the worst of times.” A Tale of Two Cities.

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far way.” This one is from Star Wars.

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice

Endings are important too – knowing how something ends is so important in storytelling. Here are a couple of famous ending:

“They lived happily everafter.” Fairy tales.

“All was well.” Harry Potter series.

Endings as new beginnings. Life out of death.

Faith Stories’ Endings

The Christian faith also has had stories of endings and end times, but their function, while helpful in allaying concerns of the faithful about what is to come, also serves as a warning on how to live now. Each of our scriptures today approaches this challenge. The ten maids headed to a wedding have had notice that things might get delayed, but only half are prepared for the wedding covenant with the Messiah when the groom comes, and in Amos, we get a vision of a “day of the Lord” with light and brightness when judgment will be handed out. In both cases, there is a startling reversal of expectations.

Amos' Rolling Justice

As old testament prophets go, Amos is one concerned with the Jewish people honoring the covenants with God that offer protection for slaves, women and the poor, and limit punishment to equitable levels.

Here our prophet carries the message even further. His critique of ritual as being empty is not because it is improper, or false, or because it is offered to other gods. The problem is the absence of justice and righteousness; and without Israel's commitment to these things, there can be no relationship to begin with.

While it might be tempting to say there can be no salvation without justice and righteousness, it might be more accurate to say that for Amos, justice and righteousness *are* Israel's hoped-for salvation, and they have been present all along.

God's repudiation of Israelite ritual thus ends with a double imperative: take away the noise of your singing, but "let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Justice and Righteousness as Gifts

Scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way:

What is before us in our society, as it was before the Hebrews, is a life-or-death decision about God and neighbor. The God-decision is a recognition that we are not autonomous to do whatever we may want to do. The God of covenant is no therapeutic push-over who benignly accepts selfish anti-neighborliness and the cheapening of the human fabric.¹

Let justice and righteousness flow in our daily lives; we are encouraged that it might be the way that we save ourselves from excess attention to our needs and wants, from the way we want things, from insisting that we come before others.

How to Take Action

The invitation to covenant is to practice the daily discipline of taking action for the kind of justice God imagines. The journey to take action is likely to involve these steps along the way:

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. "Making the God Decision." *Huffington Post* — Religion. November 2, 2011.

- *Humbleness to know that we don't see.* One key part of the journey to embracing justice is that we need to see with new eyes, often helped along by those who have been doing this work longer.

Our church is embarking on the mission study, the first step toward calling a new pastor, and one activity that the task force is contemplating is asking community leaders what needs they see in the community. And one of our team has noticed that the community has changed from the 1970s when they lived here before, and there are some implications in that. I hope the Mission Study will allow us to see more where justice and mercy might roll like a stream of water.

Similarly, some in our congregation are finishing up a weekend of a virtual conference with the Presbyterian Border Ministry to learn about what is happening in our neighborhood of the US/Mexico border.

- *Finding teachers for justice.* Our own passion for a newly discovered issue can sometimes get in the way if we don't take the time to learn about the full context of issues

Daniel Hill is a white pastor who decided to volunteer at an African-American ministry in the urban area where he had just started a church. To his surprise, instead of being given a leadership role, he was assigned to small group of students to tutor. I mean, he was a pastor! But gradually he realized that the lay people he worked with had far more experience with the students and families than he did, and that an apprenticeship was his right place.

- *Practicing our skills.* Once we have begun to see more clearly, and gained skills and abilities from being taught by those who know better, then we can practice them as deeply as any "official" spiritual practice, because these skills? – they *are* spiritual practices.

Closing - *From Sarah Are*

Listen.

I have a story to tell—

A story of a God who longed for justice.

A story of a God who pushed back the waters to make dry land.

A story of a God who would not take "no" for an answer when it came to the safety of God's own.

For God's people were suffering.

God's people were crying out.

God's people were shackled and bound by oppression.

So God said to Moses, "Speak."
"Let my people Go."
And Moses spoke—
Over and over again.
Moses stood up for justice,
But over and over again, Pharaoh said no.
Power said no.
The path to justice is never easy, is it?
The path to change is never a straight line, is it?
So like Rosa, who sat on the bus, and Martin who had a dream,
Moses kept trying.

God kept speaking.
Moses kept listening.
Hope kept breathing.
And when power tried to unravel justice,
The people kept dreaming.
God longed for justice.
God *still* longs for justice.
So we worship God—
For human injustice will never be strong enough
to unravel God's dream that all might be free,
And all might know love.

Amen