

Tim Scholl
Bethesda on the Bay Lutheran
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Amos 3:1-12

Amos 3:1 Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

- 2** You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities.
- 3** Do two walk together
unless they have made an appointment?
- 4** Does a lion roar in the forest,
when it has no prey?
Does a young lion cry out from its den,
if it has caught nothing?
- 5** Does a bird fall into a snare on the earth,
when there is no trap for it?

Does a snare spring up from the ground,
when it has taken nothing?

- 6** Is a trumpet blown in a city,
and the people are not afraid?
Does disaster befall a city,
unless the LORD has done it?
- 7** Surely the Lord GOD does nothing,
without revealing his secret
to his servants the prophets.
- 8** The lion has roared;
who will not fear?
The Lord GOD has spoken;
who can but prophesy?
- 9** Proclaim to the strongholds in Ashdod,
and to the strongholds in the land of Egypt,
and say, "Assemble yourselves on Mount Samaria,
and see what great tumults are within it,
and what oppressions are in its midst."
- 10** They do not know how to do right, says the LORD,
those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds.
- 11** Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:
An adversary shall surround the land,

and strip you of your defense;
and your strongholds shall be plundered.

12 Thus says the LORD: As the shepherd rescues from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear, so shall the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued, with the corner of a couch and part of a bed.

The frequent use of the beautiful quote from Amos 5:24 — ‘let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ — has helped to establish Amos’ reputation as a social justice warrior. Taken as a whole, the short book of Amos reinforces the message of that passage in surprising ways. His message goes beyond indictments of Israel’s sin, although those are an important part of Amos’ message as well. Yet in chapter 2, Israel’s sins include oppression of the poor, outright rejection of the afflicted, incestuous sex, the profanation of altars and the very people God raised up to address the Israel’s great sin. The nazirites set apart by God have been induced to violate their vows, leaving Israel to be ‘pressed down in place.’ This speaks to an unholy blending, rather the separation from its neighbors that was Israel’s mark and task.

God speaks directly to Israel in chapter 3, calling them out for their iniquities, and the cause and effect questions that begin in verse 3 lead to a more pertinent question: ‘Does disaster befall a city unless God has done it?’ (6). There is consolation as well: God first reveals his secrets to the prophets. But he also calls the Philistines and Egyptians to witness Israel’s near-total ruin. The end of the passage leaves Israel in tatters, with the people of Samaria rescued with only their household junk as proof of God’s displeasure.

When we read the whole account attributed to Amos, we see a wider engagement with social justice that regards Israel as one among many nations, but the writer also notes that ‘You only have I known of all the families of the earth.’ If Israel could not rely on its exceptionalism, it could still depend upon God’s warnings.

Help us to be open to both your consolation and your warnings, God. The prophets declared your wrath; when we also consider your good news, we understand you more fully. Amen.