



First United Church of Oak Park

What Does God Think of the Church

Amos 7:1-9

John Edgerton

July 17, 2022

What does God think of the church? I mean this church in particular? What is God's view of this place, this people, this community?

It's not an easy question to answer, actually. And it's not really something that I talk about that much, certainly not in preaching. I often speak about God's particular love for each one of us. I often talk about the way we are each made in the image of God, fearfully and wonderfully made. But the church as an institution--God's view of us--is much less clear. Each of us individually might be beloved in the sight of God, but what about our collective endeavor as this congregation? What does God expect of us as a congregation, how does God judge our decisions as rightly or wrongly made, what are the principles and possibilities on the divine mind?

As is often the case, to find greater clarity about such matters, we must look into early Scripture. We have to look to the classical prophets, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Amos, among others. Amos is an excellent place to jump in if you are looking to understand classical Biblical prophecy. It has every element of classical prophecy, and it is not very long. It has everything—an account of how the prophet came to be a prophet, a series of direct addresses attributed to God, a clash with the powers that be, predictions of doom, and the promise of restoration. All in just nine chapters; you could read it over a cup of coffee. Provided it was a pretty big cup of coffee.

The passage we heard read earlier is a triad of three visions, all supposed to be read as a unit together. The vision of locusts, the vision of fire, and the vision of the plumb line. And taken together, these three visions give us something to go on in trying to understand what God thinks of our church. Thinks of any institution really, but particularly those institutions that are dedicated to God.

The first vision, of the locusts: it is God showing Amos a possible future in which unstoppable swarms of locusts devour the crops of the people. And Amos objects, begging God, how will Jacob survive, he is so small? And God decides against it. The second vision is of fire sweeping across the whole land, and Amos objects again, begging, how will Jacob survive, he is so small? And God decides against that, too. The third vision is of a plumb line held up to the structures of the houses of worship and centers of power that would be left desolate. To this vision, Amos does not object. Amos offers no objection to God's plan, and God goes through with it.

So what's the difference between these visions? Why would Amos object to the first two and not the third? Does God just love crops and hate religious institutions? Well, let's get into it.

In the first vision, there is indeed a plague of locusts that eats the crops, but it doesn't happen at just any old time. The vision says that the locusts descend at the time of the late harvest, after the king had taken his pick of the crops. These early harvested crops would serve not only as the king's own food supply, but also could be divvied out to those religious and political leaders in the king's favor. The poorest and weakest and hungriest would suffer, and the powerful would be fine. Amos objects strenuously, and rightly so; the king has enough, but the people will have nothing. God agrees with the prophet, to punish the weak and spare the strong is not in keeping with divine justice.

The second vision seems to take a slightly different tack; fire sweeps over the entirety of the crops, the whole land, in fact. It would be a much more indiscriminate devastation. Perhaps this would be more just, if everyone suffered equally? Isn't there a certain mechanical fairness to total devastation? The prophet objects to this, too—the people, the ordinary people, would still have nothing, would still suffer. God agrees with the prophet, for the weak to suffer just as much as the strong is not in keeping with divine justice.

The third vision is of a plumb line, held up against the stone edifices of the political and religious authority. Now, a plumb line is just a string with a weight at the end of it. But as a building tool it is essentially unchanged from the time of the prophet Amos. The weight on the string pulls it straight down, and it is guaranteed to be perfectly perpendicular to the ground. If a column that looks straight is actually a bit crooked, the plumb line will show it right away. If a wall of a building is leaning over and on its way to collapse, the plumb line will show it right away. What this vision reveals is God holding up a plumb line to the religious and political institutions of the day, to find out if anything is crooked. And to this idea, that those with power are held accountable, Amos has no objection to that at all. There is no "how will Jacob survive he is so small," when God proposes laying waste to houses of worship, and centers of power. It seems Jacob, as small as he is, will do just fine.

For Amos, in his day, the religious and political institutions were so disconnected from the people's needs, that the prophet has no comment whatsoever about their potentially disappearing. The crops being destroyed? No way, the people would starve. The entirety of the land burned to a cinder, no way, the people would starve. Knock down the religious and political powers that be? The prophet says, sure, go ahead, the people will be just fine.