



A SERMON

by Rev. Joann H. Lee: November 16, 2025



"Let This Silence Become a Bridge" by Drew Jackson.

I wake in the morning and sink down into the quiet Center.
Before the news and the heartbreak.
Before the world becomes all fire and brimstone.
Tell me, is this salvation?
I could stay here, alone and away.
I could place my life in the company of the undisturbed.
But if I do, I will surely lose You. Friend of Sorrows, Acquaintance of Grief.
Let this silence, then, become a bridge.
Let me walk it to where Love is.
Trudging among the bones where the prophets call to the four winds,
and a Voice cries out saying Live! Live!
Let this silence become a forgotten thing
if it does not lead me to the hill outside the camp.

Amos 1:1-2; 5:14-15, 21-24

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

And he said: The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem;

the pastures of the shepherds wither, and the top of Carmel dries up.

Seek good and not evil, that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.

Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate;

it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

IF WE WERE TO ASK AMOS, "What's more important, doing justice or going to worship, what do you think Amos would say?"

Scripture leaves very little to the imagination. After all, he says: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Amos wants justice. And Amos argues, it's not him who wants justice; it's actually God! More than good music; more than a great choir; more than our hymns or beautifully crafted prayers; God wants us to do justice in the world.

For Amos, if we have to choose between worship and justice, there is no contest. It's justice every time. But what's interesting to me, is that I don't think it's an either/or situation, or even a both/and situation. Because for Amos, you cannot worship God *unless* you are *also* doing justice. One does not exist without the other. Well, to be clear, justice can exist without worship.

But worship? It cannot exist without the practice of justice because God will not accept it. Worship without justice is not worship at all.

And so, if we gather here, week to week, in our "solemn assembly" for an hour, but do no justice the other 167 hours of the week? God despises whatever it is we offer here, no matter how good, no matter how excellent, no matter how much. "I loathe it," some translations say.

And in the book of Amos, the justice that God seeks is specifically economic justice.

Now, I don't recommend you take financial advice from your pastors, *per se*. There are other professionals who could probably help you with that more than I could. But the *Bible* does not shy away from talking about matters of money.

Our scriptures, sometimes in meticulous detail, outline what God envisions as a fair and equitable economy. They tell us God's hope for how we'll spend our money; where we'll give our money (because it is expected that we will give); and by what means we'll distribute our wealth.

Now, the prophet Amos wasn't a prophet by birth or trade, it wasn't his day job, if you will.

Amos actually had land and money and property and wealth! He came from a smaller town in Southern Judah, but he was a businessman.

Verse one of Amos calls him a shepherd, but later on in the book, we learn that he's not just some hired hand tending to someone else's flock. He *owns* the sheep, and he *owns* the land on which the sheep graze. And this land also has sycamore trees that grow figs, so he's diversified his portfolio, if you will. Some commentators even compare Amos's line of work to modern-day agribusiness, like large-scale farming with income coming from multiple sources.

So, in this way, Amos is not quite like Isaiah, or John the Baptist, or other *professional* prophets, who come from the outside or the margins to critique the wealthy and the powerful. Amos is a businessman, a landed property owner, who has been called by God to speak up in the face of gross wealth inequality.

Even as someone who has and makes money, Amos's relationship with God makes it impossible for him to stay silent when such great inequalities exist. And what Amos was witnessing in the northern kingdom of Israel was too much the corruption, the exploitation, the oppression.

Now, we know that God sometimes calls people to full-time, vocational ministry. That's what pastors are. But sometimes God calls prophets from the everyday business and busy-ness of their lives, to speak a word of truth from God into their current context.

That was true for Amos, and I wonder if it is true for some of you. Perhaps God is not asking you to leave your line of work or give up your company to become a minister. But perhaps God *is* asking you to help those with whom you work, to do so more fairly and justly, to call out practices that harm and advocate for policies that heal. You see, the wealth disparity that was happening in Amos's day, did not happen by accident. No, rather, the wealthy elite who lived in luxury could do so because they were exploiting the poor. They implemented harsh taxes, and dishonest business practices. They didn't pay their workers fairly, and they created crushing debt with high interest. The wealthy of Amos's day came to that wealth and stayed in that wealthy by perpetuating systems of economic injustice.

Amos, however, was relatively successful and wealthy, too, but he was not corrupt or oppressive in his dealings. He was faithful in his worship of God, and he was fair in his dealings of finance.

Amos sought not just for his own flourishing, but the flourishing of all people. And he knew, that the flourishing of others was not a threat to his own well-being. Because as Paul Wellstone from Minnesota used to say: "We all do better when we all do better."

Amos was a businessman who chose to deal fairly with others, and to practice justice in his day to day life. His goal wasn't to amass wealth, but to live abundantly. Those are very separate things. Jesus says in John 10:10, "I have come so that they may have life and have it abundantly."

God *wants* us to live lives of abundance, but not so at the expense of others', and not so at the cost of justice. God knows that a truly abundant life includes justice that rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Let's sit with that image for a moment. When have you seen water roll down? Maybe at Yosemite or a waterfall somewhere?

For me, I kept hearing and seeing the water that rolls down at Niagara Falls. Anyone been to Niagara Falls? I only went as a child, but that water rolling down is a whole-body experience.

It's thunderous and loud, filling your ears. And as the water careens off the side of a cliff, you can hardly see where it lands because so much of it then splashes back up. If you get close enough to it, that mist sprays you, wetting your skin. If you were to stand under it, it would overwhelm you.

Let justice roll down. *That's* what God means. Let justice *overwhelm* us; let justice *fill* the earth; let justice flow abundantly with no foreseen end. Let justice cover every part of who we are, surrounding us like a force that cannot be ignored and cannot be stopped.

Not once in the Bible, does it say, let justice trickle down. Because something that trickles down, whether it be economics or water, will not get to those who long for it down below.

So, by contrast, have you ever seen water just trickle down? In nature, it can kind of be pretty, maybe. But it's usually just a great disappointment. Like turning on the shower, only for the water pressure to be extremely weak, drip, drip, drip.

Justice that trickles down is slow, unsatisfying, and frustrating. As Dr. King once said, "justice delayed is justice denied." So waiting for justice to trickle down is not, in fact, justice at all.

Erin Wathen with some humor and sarcasm reminds us that Jesus didn't say: "*I am the slow trickle of life. All who come to me will probably be thirsty again in like 5 minutes.*"¹

Rather, she says: "Remember that our God is a God of abundant life. Blessings that overflow, peace that rushes like a mighty river, justice that rolls down like water; and we follow Jesus, who is the water of life. There is no trickle about it."

So to answer the question in today's sermon title - Will justice roll down or trickle down? It's roll down.

But I have to admit, as I pondered this passage, I wondered if that was the right image for justice.

I like the image; it's powerful and poetic. And I know that many people deeply connect with it and are compelled by it. But when have we ever witnessed justice being dispensed from the top down?

Of course, trickle-down justice doesn't work. But is roll-down justice some unattainable dream, a pie in the sky utopia that can't exist in our broken world? Because in my experience, people at the top of the waterfall don't let justice trickle down, let alone roll down. Instead, the water is often dammed and blocked from even getting close to where it could roll down.

Friends, did you know that if you had one trillion dollars, and you decided you would spend one million dollars of that, each and every single day until it runs out, it would take you nearly 3000 years to spend it all. Three thousand years! That's absurd to me!

So I have hard time imagining a world where justice rolls down. And I know, it's ultimately rolling down from God, not fallible human beings. But that's just not how I've witnessed the waters of justice flowing. It's never been top down.

But then, I heard Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish biblical scholar, read this passage using the Revised Jewish Publication Society or JPS translation. And it says this: "But let justice well up like water..." Well up, from the ground up.

And I know it doesn't have the same kind of oomph as justice that rolls down, but it sure looks much more like the justice I've witnessed happening in our time.

It doesn't come from those at the top but comes from the people. It is a groundswell movement that is demanded not just given. It wells up because it can no longer be contained beneath the earth, and it is grassroots and communal; it is rooted and grounded; it rises from the bottom up.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/irreverin/2017/12/let-gods-blessings-trickle-slowly-stuff-bible-doesnt-say/>

That's how justice gets done.

"Let justice well up like water..." It's powerful to me.

Did you know that people used to believe that redwoods competed for survival? We thought that these trees fought and dominated one another for light and nutrient-rich soil, trying to get the best for themselves while depriving other plants and trees from growing around them.

But we were wrong. Redwoods help one another grow. They champion the flourishing of all those around them. They share the water that is in the ground. And in doing so, they not only survive, but they all flourish and thrive. Amos was not asking the wealthy and powerful of his time to give up their thriving in order for someone else to thrive. He was reminding them of the age-old truth that is written in the DNA of the redwoods.

The truth that says: when we make sure everyone else thrives, then we all can thrive.

So, let us go and do likewise.

Amen.