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Portraits of God's Judgment
Amos 7:1 – 8:14

Do you like art?

I'll have to admit that a lot of what passes for art today— really for the past 75 years— doesn't look like art to me! Some of the different styles of painting and sculpture just don't make sense! And some of the themes are totally inexcusable.

But real art can be inspiring. My family and I experienced that to some degree last summer on vacation. After our sons graduated from high school, we went on a two-week road trip out west to the Grand Canyon and a few other sites in Arizona.

We have some dear friends in Oklahoma City, Tom and Beth Ogburn. Tom is the senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City. He had invited me to come and preach at his church, so we coordinated it with our trip, spending some time in Oklahoma City on our way to Arizona.

During our time there, Tom had arranged several tours for us. One of those was a tour of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. It just so happened that Jay Allen, one of the associate pastors of the church, was a volunteer docent (or guide) at the museum. Tom arranged for him to give us a personal tour.

It was wonderful! It really wasn't what we expected judging from the name of the museum. Rather than ropes and rifles and saddles and six-shooters, the museum was filled with some very impressive works of art, ranging from huge sculptures to paintings of majestic landscapes and western scenes, and one grand room with huge panoramic paintings of several notable western landscapes.

The art was indeed inspiring!

That's the way genuine art is.

It can convey things to us that are difficult to convey on other cognitive levels.

This is often particularly true of portraits. Rather than being like a photo, a painted portrait tries to convey more than just what the subject looks like. It resembles the person, but certain features of a portrait seek to convey something of the subject's character and the essence of his or her personality. It might be a book the person is holding in the portrait, or what the subject is portrayed as doing in the picture.

Well, this morning, I want to invite you to visit an art gallery of sorts with me. As is sometimes the case, all the pieces are by one artist, the prophet Amos. The works in this display aren't watercolors or oil-on-canvas; they're all word-portraits. The subject of each portrait is God, highlighting his role as Judge of all the nations of the earth, but especially of his people Israel.

It's not an extensive collection, but it is comprehensive and powerful. Come visit it with me now, and let me be your docent to guide you through Amos' collection . . .

The portraits

There are seven portraits in this collection.

The first portrait portrays God as preparing a locust plague to send on Israel as a judgment.

7 ¹ This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up. ² When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, "Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" ³ So the LORD relented. "This will not happen," the LORD said.¹

In his vision, Amos sees God forming this locust plague just as the latter growth or the second crop was beginning to sprout. That's significant timing, because the king got the first mowing as a tax. Amos sees these locust swarms stripping the land clean. There would be no more crops until the following year.

When Amos sees the total destruction the locusts cause, he pleads for mercy for Israel, and the LORD relents. Here is judgment, with advanced warning, tempered by mercy.

The second portrait portrays a judgment by fire (7:4-6).

⁴ This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: The Sovereign LORD was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. ⁵ Then I cried out, "Sovereign LORD, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" ⁶ So the LORD relented. "This will not happen either," the Sovereign LORD said.

Amos sees God calling for judgment by fire (like Sodom and Gomorrah, indicating the depths to which Israel has sunk).

When Amos sees that it devours both sea and land, he pleads for mercy for Israel, and the LORD relents. Again, here is judgment, with advanced warning, tempered by mercy.

The third portrait is a vision of God's plumb line (7:7-9).

⁷ This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸ And the LORD asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. ⁹ "The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam."

Amos sees the Lord standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, holding a plumb line in his hand to check it. The wall is terribly out of plumb—it's leaning, it's not straight.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

The LORD asks Amos, "What do you see?"

Amos replies, "A plumb line." It was clear to Amos how much the wall was out of plumb.

So the Lord declares that he is setting a plumb line among Israel to show how crooked they have become, and that he will never spare them again. The places of worship in Israel will be destroyed, as will the house of King Jeroboam II.

Because of their refusal to repent, they have chosen God's judgment. And now Amos says *nothing*.

The fourth portrait shows God's judgment on Amaziah the priest of Bethel (7:10-17).

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. ¹¹ For this is what Amos is saying: "'Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.'"

¹² Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. ¹³ Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴ Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' ¹⁶ Now then, hear the word of the LORD. You say, "'Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the house of Isaac.'

¹⁷ "Therefore this is what the LORD says: "'Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land.'"

Amaziah informs the king of Amos' message, then tells Amos to go back home and prophesy.

Amos replies that he was not a professional prophet, but that God took him from his work as a shepherd and a tender of sycamore figs and sent him to prophesy to Israel. He was doing what God commanded him to do.

As for Amaziah, because he was opposing God by opposing his prophet, he would be judged, with horrible effects on him, his family, and his inheritance.

The fifth portrait is a vision of a basket of summer fruit (8:1-3).

8 ¹ This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. ² "What do you see, Amos?" he asked. "A basket of ripe fruit," I answered. Then the LORD said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. ³ "In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies—flung everywhere! Silence!"

There's a play on words here in the Hebrew. The LORD shows Amos a basket of summer fruit (Hebrew *qayits*), and declares, "The end (Heb *qets*) has come on my people Israel" (NRSV).

He will spare them no longer; he won't let them off. The effects of this judgment will be grievous and gruesome.

The sixth portrait shows God's judgment on "Sabbath saints" (8:4-10).

⁴ Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, ⁵ saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"—skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, ⁶ buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. ⁷ The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done. ⁸ "Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile; it will be stirred up and then sink like the river of Egypt. ⁹ "In that day," declares the Sovereign LORD, "I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰ I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day.

Amos is clear about their sins: they trample on the needy and do away with the poor. In other words, they practice injustice and take advantage! In their religiosity, they refrain from doing these things on the Sabbath and other holy days, but they can hardly wait for those days to get over so they can resume their greed and corruption.

But God will not forget these deeds! His judgment will bring trembling, mourning, and turmoil in the land. It will be so frightening and awful that it will be like parents mourning for an only son that has died.

The seventh portrait is perhaps the most frightening of all—a famine of hearing the words of the LORD (8:11-14).

¹¹ "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign LORD, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. ¹² Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it. ¹³ "In that day "the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst. ¹⁴ They who swear by the shame of Samaria, or say, 'As surely as your god lives, O Dan,' or, 'As surely as the god of Beersheba lives'—they will fall, never to rise again."

Indeed, this will be the worst judgment of all—people will wander around, trying to hear from God, but will not be able to hear him. Young people will faint from it, and those who serve other gods will fall, never to rise again.

Amos gave seven portraits of God as Judge, and what his judgment on Israel would be like. These are portraits painted with dark and foreboding colors. Remember that they're portraying only one side of God's character—as Judge. But even in the darkness of these portraits, there are light hues, because it's clear that God's mercy and grace have been extended time and again, but

refused.

Bad news, good news

These portraits convey a powerful message to us about God as Judge. *God's judgment is never without reason or without warning.* The people of Israel mistook their prosperity for a sign that God was pleased with them; all the while they were oppressing the poor and living in immorality. God had warned them time and again, and called them to repent. But they had ignored it all. Now, because of their sin and their continued refusal to repent, judgment was coming!

There's so much about Christ's church today that's very similar to Israel in Amos' day.

Let's face it. The *actual* moral standards of professing Christians are not very different from the world around us! It is an indictment against the church that our lifestyles distinguish us very little from those who aren't believers! Not only is the personal morality of many professing Christians often lacking, but we often, perhaps without even realizing it, participate in and perpetuate the oppression of the poor and downtrodden.

God is not pleased with such living! *He calls us to repent!*

Now the Bible clearly teaches that we are not saved by our works; we can never earn our way into a right relationship with God (*e.g.*, Romans 3:20; Ephesians 2:8-9).

But it also clearly teaches that once we experience God's grace and are made right with him through faith, we are called to a life of righteousness—a moral lifestyle and appropriate treatment of all people. He has created us for good works, and calls us to live accordingly! This kind of lifestyle demonstrates our faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:10; James 2:14-26)!

But God's plumb line among us shows us how far off the mark we so often are. And it reminds us that to continue in sin brings judgment on us as his people, just as it did with Israel.

Indeed, *God's judgment is never without reason! Nor is it without warning!* Amos' portraits of God as Judge warn us of what we face if we continue in disobedience and rebellion.

So as we come to the end of our visit, what have these portraits said to you? What have they said to us as a church?

And what will we do about it?

†MEG