

TRUTH TELLERS

Scripture: Amos 5:18-24 **The Day of the LORD**

¹⁸ Woe to you who long
for the day of the LORD!

Why do you long for the day of the LORD?

That day will be darkness, not light.

¹⁹ It will be as though a man fled from a lion
only to meet a bear,

as though he entered his house
and rested his hand on the wall
only to have a snake bite him.

²⁰ Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light—
pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

²¹ “I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.

²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.

²³ Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

MESSAGE:

Amos was a truth teller. He was a prophet of Israel, one of many truth tellers whom God sent over the years to confront His people with their sins and warn them of the judgment they would bring down on themselves if they didn't repent. The prophets were not popular in Israel because they kept telling the Israelites what they DIDN'T want to hear. They were just like us: we say we want people to tell us the truth, but when they do we don't like it and we don't like them for doing it. The prophets were scorned, mocked, manhandled and even murdered. In spite of it all, they set their face like flint and told the truth to God's people whether they wanted to hear it or not. They were God's means of injecting the antibiotic of truth into spiritually-diseased Israel.

The first prophet was Moses. Through Moses, God gave the Israelites a book of instruction called the *Torah*. The *Torah* had three parts: the moral law (the Ten Commandments) which explained the difference between right and wrong; the civil law, which taught them how to organize and govern their society; and the ceremonial law, which showed them how to worship God and receive forgiveness of their sins. The *Torah*

was God's gift to His people, a body of instruction which showed them how they could live according to His good will, and how they could be forgiven when they failed to live according to His will. But as Moses soon discovered, far from being grateful for His gift, the Israelites were infuriated by it. They showed their displeasure by immediately breaking its first and greatest command: *"I am the Lord your God: you shall have no other gods before me."* They made an idol, a golden calf, and indulged in a pagan orgy to worship it.

Thus began a thousand years of lawlessness and pagan worship in Israel. God's gift of His perfect law was like a red flag to a bull as far as the Israelites were concerned: they rebelled against everything He had commanded. The sin of the golden calf was repeated endlessly in shrines that were raised up all over Israel to the gods of the Canaanites, the Babylonians and the Egyptians. They committed adultery, they murdered one another, they dishonored their parents and they sacrificed their children to pagan gods. In short, they did everything God had forbidden them to do and they failed to do the things He had instructed them to do. And they did it all in spite of the clear warning Moses had given them before he died: *"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed."* (Deut. 30:15-18)

The Israelites knew what was at stake but they disobeyed—and not just occasionally, but habitually. God sent prophet after prophet to remind them what the consequences of their disobedience would be. Samuel warned them: *"...if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you...."* Through Isaiah God said: *"All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good...Such people are smoke in my nostrils...I will destine you for the sword, and you will all bend down for the slaughter."* Through Jeremiah He admonished them: *"[Since] they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods...and...have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew...I will devastate this city and make it an object of scorn."* Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Joel, Obadaiah, Jonah, Micah—God sent prophet after prophet to warn the Israelites of the disaster they were courting if they kept breaking the Lord's commands and worshipping pagan gods. But the Israelites didn't want to hear the truth; they preferred to be comforted with pleasant lies. And there were always a plentiful supply of lying prophets to serve their wishes. As a result, disaster after disaster fell upon them. The Babylonians invaded them, destroyed their temple and slaughtered half the population of Jerusalem. The Persians introduced them to the exquisite tortures of crucifixion. The Greeks tried to wipe out their religion and replace it with their own—and very nearly succeeded. Finally, the Romans became their masters and governed them under what amounted to martial law. The Israelites paid a steep penalty for turning away from God.

Finally God sent His ultimate Truth Teller and Prophet: His own Son, Jesus the Christ. And like the prophets who had preceded Him, Jesus gave the Israelites a stern dose of truth. In his first recorded sermon he told them: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* *"You have heard that it was said to the people*

long ago, 'Do not murder...' but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." If the Israelites had hoped for a more lenient prophet than the ones they were used to, they were in for a big disappointment. This was new and even stronger medicine than they had ever received before. What Jesus was saying was that the Ten Commandments not only applied to what they said and did, **but to what they thought as well!** The flash of inner anger, the private lustful thought—these were as bad in God's eyes as outright murder or fornication. And to drive the point home, Jesus added: "If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away....If your right hand causes you to sin, chop it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." This was ruthless logic: God searches our hearts; our hearts are full of sin; the wages of sin is death; **so we all must all die.** Unless, of course, we trust the Savior God has sent into the world to bear the penalty for our sins.

God's people had never liked what the Old Testament prophets had to say and they liked even less what Jesus had to say. Sure, he offered salvation, but only if they admitted that they were totally depraved and could do nothing to save themselves. Jesus called for complete repentance and self-denial: the admission that we are hopelessly lost in our sins and can't do anything to save ourselves. No wonder people rejected him! This was a truth that few could bear. So it's not surprising that they treated the ultimate Truth Teller even worse than the ones who had preceded him.

It's hard to admit that we are totally corrupt and lost in our sins. We like to think of ourselves as having at least a spark of good somewhere inside us. Our pride will hardly allow us to think anything less. Yet one can search the Scriptures in vain for confirmation that there is natural goodness in a man. God's judgment is unequivocal: "Every inclination of the thoughts of [man's] heart is only evil all the time." [Gen. 6:5] "There is none that does good, not even one." [Ps. 14:3] These were not new truths; they went all the way back to *Genesis* and the flood. Yet when Jesus reminded us of them, we killed him for it. Because our problem is that way down deep inside, we hate the truth. Way down deep inside, we are a moral mess—and yet somehow we manage to remain proud of ourselves.

What we need is to have our *insides* cleaned up. We can—and we do—make earnest attempts to clean ourselves up on the *outside* from time to time. We swear off lying, or gossiping, or using pornography or losing our temper—and we can make a pretty good go of it for awhile. But sooner or later the inside rot breaks out and the old habits return and we're right back where we started. We are, Paul says, like whitewashed tombs: pretty on the outside, but full of decay and death within.

As we used to say in the sixties: Man, it's a drag! However hard we try, we can't get rid of the sin that lurks at the core of our being. Just the other day I was visiting some folks in a nursing home. I was going about my work in good spirits, feeling like God was in His heaven and all was right with the world. As was leaving the nursing home I realized that I was smiling and I asked myself, "Why does it make me feel good to do this?" Was it simply because I was privileged to be the instrument of God's grace, someone He used to bring comfort to people who were hurting? Was it simply the good I was accomplishing that made me smile? Well, yes, there was some of that. But right behind that good thought, another thought *slithered* out of the recesses of my mind: that the people I had just visited probably thought it was nice of me to visit them, and they would probably tell their families how nice I was to visit them, and then their families would think that I was a

real nice guy and—who knew where it all might lead? I might end up with everybody thinking I was the nicest guy in the world! Wouldn't that be swell! And so it wasn't just God I was trying to glorify: it was ME as well! And that smile on my lips probably had as much to do with the good I figured was EARNING as it did with the good I was DOING.

See how it works? Paul wrote: *"When I want to do good, evil is right there with me."* Vanity may not seem evil, but don't you believe it! Vanity is self-glorification, and when we're busy glorifying ourselves, we aren't glorifying God. We're just putting another coat of paint on the tomb when what we need to do is open up the tomb so that God can clean it out. And the only way to do that is to admit that we're a total mess and then confess the mess to God—and to one another.

The first time Karen and I walked into a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church—Luther Memorial Chapel in Shorewood, Wisconsin—we picked up the red hymnal and along with everyone else I read aloud the words of confession on page sixteen: *"Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word and deed. Wherefore we flee for refuge to Thine infinite mercy, seeking and imploring Thy grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ."* I turned to Karen and said, *"Honey, this is it! I can get behind every word in that confession!"* I felt like the tax collector who couldn't even look up to heaven but could only pray: *"Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."* And I was comforted by the fact that our Lord said of that man that he went home justified.

Can it really be that easy? Yes it can, if you can bring yourself to face the truth about **who you really are**. You can't do it alone, but God has given you the Holy Spirit, whose primary job in this world is to help you see yourself as you really are. And if you ask Him to do that, He will. There is shame in the process, to be sure. There is also guilt and a certain degree of pain. But far outweighing all of the shame and guilt and pain is the truth and the freedom you will find when you have done it. The sin that remains buried and unconfessed in the whitewashed tomb of pride is the bound sin, the cankerous sin that moulders and rots and keeps breaking out in external sins. But the sin that we honestly face and confess is forgiven and stripped of all its power over us.

With the help of the Holy Spirit of God, we can all be truth tellers, and we can begin by telling the truth to ourselves.

Amen.