



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Taboo Topix, Pt 5:
Climate Change...
Prophets or Profits?*

Amos 6:4–7; 1 Timothy 6:6–12, 17–19

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I want to start with a disclaimer. I had not originally been scheduled to preach this morning, and so, while I had shared on climate change already this past January, I was not sure exactly where to go this morning for the last week of our Taboo Topics Series. So, in an act of seeking inspiration, I decided to turn to the Lectionary scriptures for this morning. For those of you who do not know, the Lectionary is an established set of scriptures that are assigned to dates on the calendar for specific Sundays of the year. Two scriptures assigned for this Sunday, September 29th come from Amos and 1 Timothy, and we will look to these verses and examine what they can offer us within the context of the Taboo Topic of how we live in and care for creation.

Now, a second disclaimer. As has been the case throughout this series, we will not spend too much time speaking into specific policy decisions about Climate Change and Creation care, but instead examine more broadly what postures and attitudes we should hold as a people of faith when we consider our relationship and responsibilities towards all of creation. And given the nature of Taboo Topics, if things go as planned, you should expect to feel at least a little uncomfortable this morning. So let's get on with it and jump right into our first scripture...

FROM THE BOOK OF AMOS

"You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches.

You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end."

Yikes, some harsh words from Amos...

A little background for those of us who are perhaps not as familiar with all of the history and context of Old Testament prophets. An over simplified explanation for the passages of Amos, is that he is calling out the people of Israel for their inability or unwillingness to remain faithful to God. This

2 unfaithfulness is exemplified in the inequality and injustice that is on display throughout their society. This is a time of two kingdoms, Southern Judah and Northern Israel. Amos is a shepherd and fig tree farmer, called as a prophet of God to warn the Northern Kingdom about the danger of not remaining faithful.

This was a time of relative peace, and perhaps even close to the pinnacle of territorial expansion and prosperity for Israel. But this relative safety and security did not lead to a more faithful, fair and just society for everyone. Amos is critical of those in power, specifically those who have taken the prosperity of the land at the expense of the laborers. There is not a lot of hand holding in Amos. He lets his listeners have it. As we can see in this selected text, he is not hesitant to call out the wealth and injustice he sees.

Does this feel familiar? A nation that has grown in wealth and prosperity, many of its people living in relative peace, complacent and happy to surround themselves with the trappings of comfort in society, where clearly, many people do not enjoy these same comforts? Wealth and power gained on the backs and at the expense of those less fortunate. When I read this, I see parallels to today. I think about us, I think about myself, I think about all of the luxuries and conveniences I take for granted. All of the creature comforts I desire for myself and my family. By the worlds' standards, I am one of the lucky ones with a home, car, clean water, a sewer system and never worrying about food. I am in the class of people Amos was warning. I must confront the fact that the everyday decisions I make as a consumer, cause me to participate in systems that exploit individuals and pollute the planet.

This is not easy to hear, not easy to process... How do we balance and consider our own prosperity in the context of our society, and the needs and desires of others on this planet? These are tough questions... Questions that I know for a fact, many in this congregation, thoughtfully and faithfully consider on a regular basis. So, let me step off this soapbox of guilt here to remind us that this scripture is not a condemnation of

enjoying the good things in life. It is not necessarily even a critique about the amount of money or possessions one has. What specifically incurs the judgment of Amos is the failure to be grieved and concerned about the ruin that is present, and soon to be coming to their own people. It is complacency and ignorance about the injustice that is already present and the existential threat of what will soon be their Assyrian exile, currently looming on the horizon.

This is very similar to the story we find ourselves in today. Ignored injustices do currently exist today within systems of great inequality, and an existential threat of planetary change is looming on the horizon. The issue is not necessarily inherent in the wealth or possessions that we possess or consume, but in our own ignorance and indifference about the effects such things have on inequality and injustice. Again it is not specifically about gaining wealth, but hoarding it.... If someone has the ability to make millions of dollars a year in a fair and just way, they may be able to provide generously to many more people and causes than if they were to give up their profitable job to volunteer compassionately somewhere for no pay. The issue for Amos is the opulence, luxury and utter lack of compassion and apathy for the injustice around them. This prophet was talking about inaction of those in power, their failure to act and the consequences that were sure to come.

So, who has a prophetic voice like Amos in the world today? Who do you think of when you think of someone not afraid to speak truth to power about apathy and the failure to take action on the issue of climate change? I know of someone who I thought of immediately, and I suspect many of you have thought of this person as well, and likely already seen the clip I am about to show... but I find these words to be prophetic for the world today.

WORDS OF GRETA THUNBERG

"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!"

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"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet, I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"

Powerful...and like Amos she too does not seem to hold back. Her words challenge us to consider the reality of this planetary crisis. Even more troubling to me is that popular Christianity, instead of being a prophetic voice, has largely continued to play a role in perpetuating the problem. Christians are statistically much more likely to be skeptical of Climate Change science than non-religious people. Much of this is fueled by biblical literalism and the theological expectations of the second coming. Numerous Christians in positions of power have suggested that this earth is ours to dominate, and since our eternal home is in heaven, there is no need to concern ourselves with the long term health of the Earth. Others have even suggested that using up earthly resources may hasten the end times.

In fact, just a few days ago pastor Robert Jeffress said this and I quote "God said he created the environment to serve us, not for us to serve the environment... This Greta Thunberg, the 16 year-old, she was warning today about the mass extinction of humanity. Somebody needs to read poor Greta, Genesis chapter 9, and tell her the next time she worries about global warming, just look at a rainbow; that's God's promise that the polar ice caps aren't going to melt and flood the world again." ...Now, It is important to note that this is not some random fringe voice, this is a leader within the evangelical community, pastor of a 13,000 member megachurch with a global radio and TV program that reaches millions. He has the ear of the President as a member of the Evangelical Advisory Board and White House Faith Initiative. However, despite greater statistical skepticism among a majority of evangelical Christians, there are indeed many faithful Christians and evangelical groups who do accept the science and seek to care

for creation. This Congregation has had a long history of being aware and active with environmental concerns.

Like Christians, white people too, are also more likely to be climate change deniers than people of color, and older Americans are much more likely to be skeptical than younger Americans. So, what we have here, are the individuals who are statistically most likely to deny climate science are also those who statistically tend to hold more wealth and power in society.

I know that for many, discussing climate change feels like a taboo topic. And I can admit that there are an incredible amount of factors, numbers and algorithms that go into calculating any complex system, especially one as complicated as global climate. So, I find I must rely on those who do understand the complexities, and many scientists have been doing this work for a long time and have arrived at the conclusion that the climate is changing and humans are to blame. For most deniers, the fact that climate is changing is generally accepted, the disagreement comes with seeing humans as the cause. Instead, many blame long natural climate cycles, Solar changes, electromagnetism and other factors. In fairness those things may have an effect, perhaps even an undervalued role in current calculations, but there should be no denying that the planet is changing in consequential ways and humans are the most to blame.

These climate change skeptics and deniers are betting against the overwhelming data and the consensus of the scientific community. They are speaking in opposition to policies that limit greenhouse gas emissions and other advances towards sustainability. Their reason, it will cost too much money. Unfortunately, there are many who do concede that climate change is real and yet still fail to act because of economic pressures. Many politicians, business leaders and those with power are consciously choosing wealth and greed in the present short-term over the known long-term realities of climate change.

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As Amos (and Greta) might point out, our apathy and refusal to accept responsibility to address this injustice will only bring about destruction. There is no simple way to put this. Our planet, God's creation, is suffering, and we are to blame. Our overconsumption and pollution is altering the planet. Our insatiable appetites for all the stuff we use in our lives each day has ripple effects around the globe. The clothing we purchase has been harvested in fields a world away, manufactured in factories that create waste, assembled by the hands of low wage workers and delivered by CO₂ emitting transportation systems. Our food, especially meat, requires vast amounts of water, land and energy to cultivate, prepare and deliver. Our waste pollutes our waterways and our oceans. Plastic and styrofoam used for a few minutes decades ago, will continue to haunt our great grandchildren for generations.

Recent studies have revealed dramatic reductions in the populations of many mammals, birds, reptiles and marine life. Populations are not just getting smaller, there has been a sharp increase in extinctions, plants and animals lost forever. And with them, we lose their potential gifts to us as a part of God's own handiwork. Scientists have noted 5 major extinction events throughout history, the last one wiped out the Dinosaurs around 65 million years ago. Humans have now initiated the 6th, called the Anthropocene. We have changed the face of the planet more dramatically in the last decades than in all of human history combined.

Just this past week, a major UN report on the state of the Oceans was released with troubling findings. Rising temperatures, acidification and lower oxygen levels in the oceans could lead to chain reactions in harming the ocean's ecosystems, contributing to an even greater loss of marine life which has already been threatened by overfishing. Ocean levels are rising and may rise at rates that destroy and overwhelm coastal communities around the globe. The planet has not seen this level of CO₂ in the atmosphere for hundreds of thousands of years, long before homo sapiens. This is altering the planets climate and creating more extreme weather patterns.

Certain areas getting dryer while new regions face flooding. A change in the severity and frequency of storms is already happening. The data is clear; we are changing the world in troubling ways.

Part of what makes this especially tragic is that those who have contributed to these issues the least, are the ones who will continue to be on the front lines of the consequences. Food insecurity, desertification, catastrophic annual flooding, disease outbreaks, becoming climate refugees... these are not problems many of us here today, will likely confront, and yet these are the realities of the changes caused by how we live. Most of us living in developed parts of the world, who have the means and power to enact change on these issues, also have demonstrated the luxury of ignoring them. Our abilities to innovate and separate ourselves from the real world consequences of climate change continue to lull us into complacency. We can easily change our thermostats, purchase flood insurance, flush away our waste water and take out our garbage, we can afford to pay more for goods and services or even relocate if needed.

But just like the prophet Amos tried to warn, the clock is ticking. We are quite literally running out of time. The issue at hand is not that we have air conditioning, or clean water or waste disposal systems. The problem is that those things have too often allowed us to be distracted from the real world consequences of our collective action. The warning lights have been blinking yellow for decades, now they are blinking red and our society for the most part remains calm on this issue because we rarely have to confront the reasons that the alarm is sounding.

But I also recognize I am largely preaching to the choir this morning. For the most part, many of us know all of this, we have heard all of this, we believe it. I know for a fact that there are individuals in this congregation who take these issues very seriously and make choices in their lives on a daily basis to mitigate their environmental impact. I can think of many

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people here right now off the top of my head, who do a much better job of this than I do in my daily life.

I can admit that there are many things that I can work at changing in my own life, I believe there are likely changes you can make in yours. Seek out resources and advice, talk to members in this congregation who are seeking to live sustainably. Find resources online from organizations like David Radcliffe's New Community Project who, by the way, just updated their website. You can become an advocate and share your concern with friends and family or with members of local and national office. While we can make changes in our own lives, there are incredible systemic issues that are significant as well.

It is crucial to acknowledge that there is no silver bullet here. Some individuals have reduced their CO₂ footprint with driving less, others by consuming less beef. In general, eating lower on the food, change and minimizing CO₂ emissions in transportation are great options. These are effective and important changes that would have very real, positive effects, if widely adopted. Reducing our overall consumption of goods, electricity and water matters. Addressing this issue requires us to act broadly and boldly across all areas of our lives.

A valuable first step should always be to genuinely seek to understand the consequences of our choices and actions. It is important that we take an inventory of the ripple effects of our own lifestyles. Remember that the critique of Amos was less about the wealth and more about the consequences of inequality. The injustices that were being ignored, the apathy and the circumstances in which individuals lived despite the suffering of others. Amos wanted repentance and faithfulness... the previous chapter of Amos famously states that God wants to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream". That is not easy, that takes work. It requires that we "fight the good fight of faith"

That's how the New Testament author of 1 Timothy put it. He wrote.

1 TIMOTHY 6:6–12, 17–19

“Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.

But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.

Fight the good fight of the faith.”

While we know that these passages from Amos and 1 Timothy were not talking about climate change, we do know that they were warning about the consequences that come from greed, inequality, injustice and gluttonous consumption. These things are simply not sustainable for any society or culture, and as we are discovering today, even this planet. Fortunately, as Christians, Jesus has already provided us with an all-encompassing, albeit, tough solution for combating climate change as well as any other injustice that we may encounter. It is a simple answer that is rarely simple to actually live out. Love God and love one another. The Author of 1 Timothy offers up some ways of doing this, *“pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.”* but even he knows that will not be easy, and so calls all of us to be prepared to... Fight the good fight of the faith.

The natural consequences of truly living out lives in which we genuinely seek to love our neighbors, requires us to think through the consequences of how our choices may broadly impact this planet, and our fellow brothers and sisters who we will never even meet. It is hard enough for us to consider the ways in which our actions may have negative effects on those who live on the other side of the planet, but one of the greatest challenges of climate change is generating an understanding

10 about how our actions will affect those who are not even alive yet.

While we are already seeing some of the consequences today, we must consider what our actions will mean for the future. History will show that the decisions made in the first half of this century could have potential impacts, not just for the next few generations, but for civilization itself. We do not know how this will play out, but right now, the trend lines look very grim. If we continue as we have, without substantial changes, worst case scenarios of temperature and sea level rise are predicted to cause massive shortages of food, limited fresh water and collapsing ecosystems. With an increasing population, this will likely lead to the collapse of infrastructure, institutions and government. We are literally talking about the potential for a full collapse of civilization as we know it in the next 50 years.

This is why we hear passion in the prophetic voice of Greta Thunberg and other young people. I suspect some of you may be sitting there thinking such a scenario may be unlikely. And the truth is I don't know, I really don't know, but the difference is that gamble is not one most here today will personally be alive to confront....But my son, your children and grandchildren will just be in the middle of their lives, perhaps trying to negotiate that horrific world with children of their own. I know for a fact, that you all care about that future generation. They should be a part of our motivation for the changes we need to make in our own lives. And not just for them, but for all people who will inherit this Earth.

The generations that have come before us have labored and passed down the prosperity and resources that we are able to enjoy and exploit today. We live in a unique window within the history of humanity, the choices we make today, the collective decisions we choose tomorrow will not only affect those on the planet today, but well into the future. This is how we love God and love others by thinking deeply about the consequences of our choices as consumers.

So let us ask ourselves...What is it that we can do in our own lives that can contribute to protecting all of God's creation, consuming less of the planet's limited resources, sustaining ecosystems and adding to the Shalom of the planet. May we heed the warnings of Amos and the prophetic voices of today, and let us look around at our prosperity and make sure we are working towards justice for one another and future generations. May we, too, have the courage to "fight the good fight of the faith"

