

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 9, 2026

And so as we move to the reading and the proclamation of God's word, I'll remind you if you're joining us for the first time—well, if you weren't here last week, I should say actually—we are in the midst of a 4-week long series we've entitled I Pledge Allegiance. We are reflecting on this 250th anniversary of our nation. We're reflecting on what it means to be faithful Christians and faithful citizens. And, so, we started last week with our sermon entitled No Other Lord and focused on the centrality of Christ as Lord. You can go back on YouTube and watch that sermon. This morning we turn to the prophet Amos. The prophet Amos is going to ground our study this day. I'll read from the fifth chapter in just a moment. But a bit of context before we pray and then read scripture together.

So Amos is preaching to Israel in the midst of a prosperous time in their nation. Amos spoke to the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. It's in approximately the 8th century BCE. Politically and economically, things were going remarkably well at the time that Amos prophesied. Israel was expanding its territories, accumulating wealth, achieving a level of security it had not enjoyed in some time. But the important context for us this day is that the prosperity was in that time profoundly unequal.

Amos sees the wealthy people living comfortably while the poor are being exploited. Throughout the book, not just in chapter 5 that we'll read this morning, throughout the book, he charges Israel with things like debt slavery, corrupt courts, trampling the poor, exploiting the needy, building luxurious lives on an unjust economic system. That means that Amos is not preaching to a nation in obvious collapse. He is preaching to a nation that thinks it is succeeding. That's a bit of context for us as we prepare to hear Amos's words, prophetic words of the Lord. In the fifth chapter, we're going to read verses 18- 24 together of Amos, chapter 5. But before we do, I invite you to join me once again with a couple deep breaths. Let's take a deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in and breathe it out slowly.

Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. That you would by your power quiet any voice within us but your own, that we might hear your word for us this day. And that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

All right. Fifth chapter of Amos beginning in the 18th verse.

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Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord. Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light. As if someone fled from a lion and was met by a bear or went into a house and rested a hand against the wall and was bitten by a snake.

Is not the day of the Lord darkness not light and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals. 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 them. 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 water and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So Amos is sent by God. The beginning of the story tells us that he is working in the field and he is called to this prophetic task. He is sent—if you read the entirety of the book which is not too difficult and not too long, and I commend it to you—he is sent to speak words of conviction to people of their religious and civil hypocrisy. As often the prophet's role in the Old Testament and even in the New Testament, the role is to hold up a divine mirror so that those who are being prophesied to might see their sins more clearly. The purpose, though, of holding up the mirror isn't simply for a clarity of sin. It is not intended only to make them feel guilty. In fact, guilt, I would posit to you, is not the emotion God intends for them to stay in. They might feel guilty and that could convict them. But the purpose of the prophet holding the mirror to God's people is for the people of God to change the way they order their lives both personally and communally.

And so, for the prophet Amos, the problem that he is holding up a mirror to among the people is that there is a disconnect between their sanctuary worship and their societal engagement.

As Emeritus Professor of Old Testament Luther Seminary, Dr. Fretheim puts it, "The issue is not simply insincerity. In fact, it appears as if this kingdom, this nation to which Amos prophesies, they are actually quite sincere. They are quite sincere in their faithfulness. The problem is that their worship and their lives have become separated from one another. And so God uses the voice of the prophet to challenge the faithfulness of God's people."

It's important for us to note that Amos prophesies out of love. Love for his people and his nation. He is a part of the people to whom he speaks and preaches and teaches.

He begins by using this phrase—"the day of the Lord." It perhaps needs a bit more context for us as well when he asks the questions or when he says "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord. Why do you want the day of the Lord?" The day of the Lord of which Amos is speaking is the day when God will come

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upon God's people and bless Israel. All of their enemies will be put to shame. Their reign will be one of peace. All people within Israel will be cared for, the hungry fed, the naked clothed.

That was the day to which the faithful people of God looked, and Amos wanted them to experience it, but he wanted them to know that they were not ready for it. He desires that all of his neighbors live into the fullness of the calling of God.

The testimony of particularly our Hebrew scripture is that critique and calling is actually the fullest expression of divine love. It is not loving to allow a people to continue to live in ways that do not care for God's people and in ways that do not glorify the creator of all.

That is why God despises the festivals of God's people. Not because he doesn't want their worship, but because they are disconnected from themselves. Amos teaches us that real love for people and nation looks just like this. And one of the things I love about our Hebrew siblings is that they leave the bad parts in their stories. They had the power of the pen, but they chose to write all of the ways that they fell short into the story so that we might learn from them now. So there's Amos in the 8th century BCE, and then centuries later comes the Christ. As those who call upon the name of Christ, Jesus gives a clear and passionate voice to the same calling that Amos gave to his people. In Matthew 25, Jesus speaks of the judgment of nations. Another way to describe this would be "the day of the Lord."

He tells a story there, a parable. I commend it to you. He talks about that day coming upon God's people and some being gathered at the right hand of God and some being gathered at the left hand of God.

And he says to those, God does, on God's right hand, "Welcome into the kingdom for you have cared for me. When I was hungry, you fed me. Thirsty, you gave me something to drink. Homeless, you offered me shelter. Naked, you gave me clothing." The people at his right hand in this parable are confused. They don't know when they've done this. Jesus says to them, "As you've done to the least of these, you've done to me." And then to those at his left hand.

"You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food. Thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me. Naked and you did not give me clothing. Sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, Matthew 25 says, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?' And then he will answer them. "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteousness into eternal life."

And if you don't think that Jesus told this parable out of a deep and abiding love for those who would hear it, then you don't understand the purpose of parables. Jesus teaches in these ways to convict most certainly, but not to leave his people in conviction, to move them so they might recognize that the fullness

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of God , that living out the fullness of the life that God intends for God's people necessitates honesty about how we are connecting our worship lives and our civic engagement, how we are connecting sanctuary and society, how we are actually moving through the world.

Prophetic witness of course is not restricted only to scripture. Our country has had many a prophet in its day. We can share in a deep list and be here for a long time. There were prophetic voices of abolition long before the civil war. There were suffragettes calling for the equality of voice and vote. There were those who put pen to paper and who spoke from pulpits and lecterns of the higher calling of our nation. They've done so in different times and in different ways because what our nation is founded upon are ideals, ideals of liberty and justice and freedom. Founded upon ideals. And yet there is distance. There is always distance. And there has always been distance between our ideals and our reality. Frederick Douglas was a prophet. If you spent any time at Faith at 250, as I commended to you last week, you can go online and spend some time with many resources. One of the ones I'll commend to you this afternoon (We will not be distracted by that. Devil works hard on Sunday morning.) So, one of the things I'll commend to you is to spend time reflecting on the work of Frederick Douglas, specifically, “What to the slave is the 4th of July?”

“What to the slave is the 4th of July?” where he wrestles with the ideals of liberty and equality and the realities of race and poverty and exclusion.

Douglas is often remembered, often remembered only for his devastating indictment of American hypocrisy. But he does more than condemn America. He appeals to our country's own professed principles and demands that our nation become worthy of them.

Part of his words that you will hopefully spend time with this week....They are a challenge on the 4th of July to national ritual, national rituals that have become detached from their intended meaning. His words are a demand that Americans live up to our highest calling and purpose. And that is different than cynicism.

Douglas does not say that liberty, equality, and constitutional government and Independence Day are meaningless. Not at all. He says that they simply become mockery when their benefits are withheld from millions of people.

He is calling us to a deeper, more true and real love of country and patriotism. Patriotism==not merely loving a country. It's not merely loving a country enough to criticize it. It is loving a country's people enough to receive its genuine achievements with gratitude, to grieve its betrayals, and to accept responsibility for its future.

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And we as a country have many times moved more closely toward justice. And every time we as Americans have moved towards justice, whether it was emancipation or women's suffrage or equal protections under the constitution, the civil rights movement, the full inclusion of LGBTQIA people, it has shown that common grace is real and possible here and that nations can move closer to the ways of justice. The prophet's voice holds up a mirror to us as Americans in these days.

The lesson from Amos calls us to shape a more faithful patriotism, a patriotism that celebrates every step towards justice, confesses every betrayal of justice, and refuses to rest until liberty belongs to everyone.

I think this is one of the things that's got me caught up a bit in the midst of this series. There's a way of loving our country, of waving a flag that feels hollow to me when it's not honest. And then there's a way of moving with pride and gratitude as Americans that is more rooted in reality. It's a more mature love of country and patriotism. It's not the infatuation of an early relationship. It's hard earned years of seeing the truth and loving and working toward a fuller expression of the promises.

This faithful posture for Christians, it can't stop with accusation. It has to contain gratitude and confession and re-commitment.

We live in a country of rich culture and great prosperity, and of that we ought to be very grateful. We also live in a place where the gap between the rich and the poor is ever widening and at an ever faster pace, dangerously and unjustly so. Many people do not experience the full inclusion of our society, and many who gained rights of inclusion years ago now have those at risk. The faithful Christian is to celebrate every step toward justice, confess every betrayal of justice, and refuse to rest until liberty belongs to everyone.

Now, the so what. Last week, I didn't want to overprescribe what that so what needed to look like for you. I trust the spirit of God knows you and can work in you. And yet I do understand that there need to be tangible ways sometimes from the pulpit for you to be engaged. If you are looking to impact our nation, I might posit to you that the best way to do that is to begin right where you are. To start here in Memphis, here even specifically in Midtown.

If you are looking to work justice for women in our community, you can come on Thursday evenings to serve in Room in the Inn women who are in unsafe living situations or they are unhoused. I've talked about coming to be a part of this before from the pulpit, and it's good and meaningful work. Here's the thing. I'm really proud we do it. The people who help to make Room in the Inn are giving of their time and energy every single week. What I know is that a very small percentage of people are actually engaged in that work. And that's not to make you feel guilty. It's to inspire you to get engaged. If we're going to do Room in the Inn every single Thursday, we need more people to raise their hand and say they're willing to come early and set up. And we need people with good backs who can survive a terrible night's sleep and

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stay with the women overnight. And we need people who are early risers and can greet them with the joy of Jesus Christ early in the morning.

But if your call towards justice is for LGBTQ inclusion, then there's a group here, Presbyqueerians and Allies, and sometimes we're marching and sometimes we're just sharing in community and that's allyship as well.

If you see the inequalities that are so prevalent along lines of race in our community, and you want to do something about it, but not out there, here, we have an Anti-racism Committee that began with a ton of energy and continues to do faithful and good work, but we need more people committed to that work.

As the gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to widen, we're doing things around food insecurity and housing insecurity and clothing insecurity as well. You can come to More than a Meal on Thursdays. You can worship, not just serve a meal, but maybe sit in a pew alongside one of our unhoused neighbors or hungry neighbors as they worship in our chapel before they share a meal together.

If you want to keep somebody in their house when the power bill goes way beyond their capacity, you can give to our Compassion Fund, and you can help serve and pay off a ton of MLG&W bills. That's the biggest need of that fund right now. There are places you can put your money, too.

There are places where you can put your stuff. Our Clothes Closet has expanded like tenfold in the last couple years.

If you want to care for the refugee, we have a No Longer Strangers ministry. There's a new Justice for Immigrants ministry in town that's kind of becoming a hub for all sorts of organizations.

If you are a lawyer or a judge and you want to help those who need legal counsel so that our justice system might be more just, David Bell's out here and he'll talk to you after worship if you want to volunteer for the Midtown Legal Clinic. It happens a couple times a year. Not sure if Rebecca's here, but they will talk to you and sign you up.

Two weeks ago, we welcomed a Montgomery Hall full of teachers and administrators from Idlewild Elementary School. It's only a stone's throw from where the first Idlewild Presbyterian Church was at the corner of Peabody and Barksdale. If you want to pour into the life of a child who might be coming in hungry and leaving, going back to a place that we can only imagine, we'd love for you to talk to Dana Brandon after worship. She's back there in the back. Yeah. And be a part of that ministry.

There are a thousand ways that you can do it here. And what I imagine is that there are thousand more ways that you can do, you can take up this calling in your personal lives as well. Here's what I would tell

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you. Every act that narrows the distance between our principles as a nation and our practices, between our ideals and our reality, makes a way for justice to roll down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream. And in this time, the faithful Christian should celebrate every step toward justice, confess every betrayal of justice, and refuse to rest until the liberty and freedom made known in Christ belongs to everyone. As it was for Amos, as it was for Jesus, so it is for us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all.