

# **Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Amos 5:18-24 ~ November 8, 2020

From the early American songbook, the lyrics begin:

As I went down in the river to pray,  
studying about that good ol' way  
And who shall wear the starry crown  
Good Lord, show me the way

I don't know what brought you here today, to this time of worship, but it's been quite a week, a hard week in many respects. An emotional roller-coaster that has revealed truths about our nation, has laid bare both strengths and short-comings, that has challenged us, I hope, to question some of our perceptions about, and appreciation of, our fellow citizens – half of whom have a different idea of what's best. We may have had some bubbles' burst – myths about American exceptionalism and entitlement. Let's be careful and committed – those of us with privilege – to neither seek nor create any version of plausible deniability. We need to own this American experiment in democracy in its entirety – the dark and the light, the goodness and the evil.

I don't know who or what brought you, but here, today, in this worship we are met with some hard words from the prophet Amos who is not one to mince words. They are hard words to hear, but like the events of this week, are necessary and ultimately, I believe, offer a path to healing and hope.

“Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” says Amos. To which we say, Amen! Yes, Lord, yes. But first: Amos begins these verses with “Alas” – *hoy* in Hebrew. It's an exclamation of grief; most often spoken at funerals. “Alas!” is the prophet's lamentation over the complacency of those who assume that only good can come to them, since they are the chosen people, God's people. Alas.

The people in Amos's time, you see, were confident: confident in their own well-being, in the rightness of their own arrangements of the economy, in the delicate hierarchical balance of civic life, and in the practice of their rituals. Alas, says Amos. Great is your blindness and smugness; great will be your downfall. Not unlike a nightmare – you will flee from a lion, only to meet a bear; will try to grope your way in the dark, only to be bitten by a snake.

What, then? Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Taking my cue from this text, I went down to the river to pray. While the ballots were being counted, I went down to Great Falls a few days back, Sarah and me, to walk the trail, to stand by the banks of the Potomac. I went to learn what the river could teach, to listen to the powerful roar of the falls, to wait and be still in the silence of a little tributary. I wanted to put my trust in the ever-flowing stream of God's justice, hoping the waters would yield up something

illuminating or encouraging – that would give heart. I commend it to you, the river as a source of wisdom and strength. It’s a better source than many these days. Let me take you there.

For both our Hebrew and Christian predecessors in the Holy Land, water was not taken for granted; it was precious. It had deep spiritual meaning: a visible sign of God’s invisible presence in the world. The very love of God was to be found in the flowing of rivers, streams, in the falling rain, in the depths of a well.

In a vision, God took Ezekiel to the temple. From the threshold they saw a river flowing in each of the four directions; to the east, down to the sea of Arabah and En-gedi. Says Ezekiel, “On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

Perhaps it’s the same river revealed centuries later: In the final verses of the Revelation to John, John says, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

God’s ever-flowing stream bears fruit for the healing of the nations.

And says Jesus to the woman at the well, “those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

What of Amos’ ever-flowing stream of God’s justice and righteousness? The Biblical verse most often quoted by Dr. King. Note first of all that Amos is not directing us toward something new. He is calling us to remember something we’ve known all along: a hidden truth – the ever-flowing river of God’s justice.

The prophetic understanding of justice and righteousness is distinct. In the Bible, justice – *mishpat* in Hebrew – looks nothing like the ancient Roman blind-folded lady justice holding the scales. The root meaning of *mishpat* is equity, fairness, care. More explicitly, it is equity and fairness for 1) widows, 2) orphans, 3) immigrants and 4) the poor; these four most vulnerable members of society.

It is paired with righteousness – *tzedaqah* – which has little to do with morality or self-righteousness. It means something more like good deeds, treating everyone with fairness, generosity, and equity. If justice is about making things right that are unfair in society – fixing the structures; righteousness is doing right by others, especially the vulnerable; it is about being in relationship, doing good deeds, tangible acts of generosity toward those in need.

So Amos would admonish us, whatever else we may seek to learn or do as a result of this election, let’s put first a daily practice of *tzedaqah* – care for the immigrants, orphans, widows, and the poor in our midst. Jesus said it this way: Love one another. Love your neighbor as yourself.

In a recent sermon, Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, “We don’t think of it this way very often but love for each other is a value on which our democracy depends. On the Great Seal of the United States, said he, above the bald eagle are banners on which the Latin words, *e pluribus unum* are written. Those words, *e pluribus unum*, literally mean, “out of many, one.” One nation from many diverse people.

But do you know where those words come from?" Curry asks. "They come from the writings of Cicero who lived during the time of the Roman Republic. Cicero said, and I quote, "When each person loves the other as much as himself, it makes one out of many." Cicero said that love for each other is the way to make *e pluribus unum* real. Jesus of Nazareth taught us that. Moses taught us that." Curry concludes: "America listen to Cicero, Jesus, Moses. Love is the way to make *e pluribus unum* real. Love is the way to be America for real."

One day Jesus was teaching. Shortly after telling his listeners that a house divided against itself cannot stand, he was told that his mother and brothers have come and are asking for him. Jesus replied, 'who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.' As if to say, your family, nationality, tribe, religion, political party, and any other credentials are of little interest to Jesus; what matters is that we do the will of God. And what is the will of God?

Later Jesus will say to them, I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Said Cornel West, "Never forget that tenderness is what love feels like in private. Justice is what love looks like in public." Let us go and do likewise. Amen.