

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Welcome –

Glad to have you all worship with us this morning! It's been a difficult and troubling week on several fronts and it's reassuring and comforting to know that we can come together to worship God, to be encouraged and reminded that whatever else is happening, our faith in God and God's love for us and for all of humanity remains steadfast.

Let's take a moment to see and greet one another – turn on your cameras and offer a greeting.

Does anyone have anything to share this morning – opportunities for celebration or service?

I need to share that I made a mistake about Joyce Bergen's location. She is no longer at the NMC – she was transferred to St. Francis in Wichita where there's a team of medical folks working on her behalf. Cards can be sent to Dan at the house and he can take them to her.

INVOCATION

Let's pray: Creator God, maker of heaven and earth, you are also Immanuel – God with us. And you have promised always to be with us, even to the ends of the earth. Be with us now, here, in all the places where we are, bless and strengthen us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

What a week it's been, God! But, of course we don't need to tell YOU that – you who created each human being who died this week. You have known their struggles and you weep with the loved ones of each as they grieve the loss. You give witness to events big and small all over this planet and all the while you long for your creation to live in shalom, expressed in the full well-being of each creature. And we share this longing with you – each time we pray for your kingdom to come here on earth, as it is in heaven, we're praying for your shalom to be made present and real. We want to be your hands and feet in this world, God, to live in ways that bring your righteousness and justice, to be people that reflect your Love and Light, to live with courageous creativity and humble honesty. Help us to be your faithful and steadfast disciples.

God, we bring you our prayers. We pray for our nation as we struggle with deep division, lack of trust, unwillingness and inability to work together, suspicion and anger. We need your healing and your compassion. We need your wisdom and mercy.

There are many in our church family who are struggling in these days, God. We pray for those struggling with medical issues. Be especially with Joyce Bergen. God, we pray for relief from pain for her. Be with her doctors as they decide on the best treatments. Be with Dan as he travels back and forth to be with her. Keep him safe and well. We pray for Don and June as they

both recover. Continue to be with them. We pray for Mary Lou and for Glen in this major adjustment in their lives. Grant healing to Mary Lou and comfort to both of them. We pray for Gloria Yoder – we give thanks for the recovery she’s experienced and we ask for that to continue in the coming days and weeks. Be also with Galen as he travels to see her and advocates for her care. Be with Caleb and his sisters as they’re all at a distance during their mom’s illness. Give them your peace and comfort.

God we continue to pray for Bethesda and the many other long-term care facilities where loved ones live and work. We thank you that the process of vaccinations has begun and we ask that this would continue smoothly and equitably. Continue to inspire and energize all of the front-line workers in their daily battles for the health and well-being of their patients. We thank you for their heroic efforts.

Be with others, God, whose needs and names you know. Bring healing. Bring comfort. Bring what is needed to each person and situation.

We pray for students and teachers as they begin learning and teaching again for this second semester. Give perseverance and commitment to each one.

Be with us now in this time of worship. Send your Holy Spirit to us, individually and as a congregation as we worship, pray, sing, hear the words of scripture and the message. Move in our hearts and minds. Move us closer to you and to understanding how to live and respond in this world as your people.

We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

DEDICATION PRAYER

Let’s offer a prayer of dedication for our financial offerings –

Dear God, we offer you our praise. We offer you our hearts. We offer you our money. We offer you our lives. Thank you for everything you give to us. Amen.

JUSTICE LIKE A RIVER – PASTOR CALEB

Amos 5:8-14, 18-24

These days it seems like each week is more eventful than a normal year.

I first want to thank all of you who have been praying for residents and staff at Bethesda Home, as well as folks from our congregation who reside or are staff at other area homes.

The last weeks have been extremely trying times. There is good news at Bethesda that none of the staff have tested positive. It’s also good news that those who aren’t positive have received the first vaccine shot.

Our prayers continue to be needed for the residents who are sick, as well as the family of Erlene Unruh, including her sisters Esther Schmidt and Meribeth Schmidt.

Truly these are unprecedented times.

This is also an unprecedented time for our country, after the rioting and mayhem in the capitol building on Wednesday incited by the words of the president.

It is a time of tremendous division and hurt in our country in which the peacemaking of followers of Jesus is needed as much as any point in recent years.

I imagine many of you felt a lot of concern and may have different feelings and reactions.

Yet I want to draw our attention to a few observations:

Many of those involved in breaking into the capitol building used Christian language and symbols.

One insurrectionist was carrying a “Christian flag” – a white flag with a cross in the corner. Others carried crosses with the words “Jesus saves.” In addition to these symbols were of course American flags, confederate flags, and even a noose erected in front of the capitol.

It disturbs me how easily an ideology of white supremacy is combined with the language and symbols of Christian faith.

I believe the long-ago prophet Amos has something to say to this.

The next two weeks, the prophet Amos will give us a talking-to. Amos is the earliest of the Old Testament prophets, a shepherd from the village of Tekoa.

He warned of grave judgment from God due to the sins of Israel and Judah and anticipated invasion and exile a couple of generations before this happened.

For just being a shepherd, he meant business.

Amos starts out with harsh words of judgment against six different neighboring nations.

Each time he begins with the same formula: “This is what the Lord says: for three sins of (name of the nation), even for four, I will not relent.”

No doubt his fellow Israelites were nodding in agreement. He uses their hatred of their enemies to hook and reel his audience in.

Then comes the surprise. He starts prophesying against Judah and Israel!

This is what the Lord says:

*“For three sins of Judah,
even for four, I will not relent.*

*Because they have rejected the law of the Lord
and have not kept his decrees,
because they have been led astray by false gods...*

This is what the Lord says:

“For three sins of Israel,

*even for four, I will not relent.
They sell the innocent for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.
7 They trample on the heads of the poor
as on the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed.*

The sins named are the big two – idolatry and social injustice – neglect and oppression of the poor and marginalized.

So I wonder what Amos would say today? I really don't know, so here's a little bit of imagining. Our present-day Amos isn't from prophet lineage. He's just a sheep farmer from Lehigh. But then he gets going.

For three sins of Russia, and even for four, I will not relent.

Because her children are hackers and pirates, and she adores that corrupt and power-thirsty Putin.

For three sins of Venezuela, even for four, I will not relent.

She has drunk herself to ruin on her former oil wealth. Because she has allowed crazy Nicolas Maduro to devastate the economy and stay in power.

For three sins of Iran, even for four, I will not relent,

For he threatens the world by developing nuclear weapons.

He refuses any other religion for his people than Islam, and breeds hate-filled terrorists.

I bet as Amos says all this, a lot of Americans would be nodding their heads, until the unexpected comes:

For three sins of America, even for four, I will not relent.

Because she is still addicted to her wealth which she built on the sweat and blood of black slaves.

Because she stole her land from its original inhabitants.

Because she has sponsored coups around the world while claiming to be the paragon of democracy.

Because her leaders stoke division, racism, and hate for their own gain.

Because she destroys the futures of her black and brown children by keeping them caged up for minor offenses.

Because she has baptized the pursuit of worldly power and wealth by plastering the veneer of Christianity over top.

Woah, that Amos is getting too feisty. Maybe breathing in all that sheep manure is getting to his head.

Don't take the details of this too seriously; I think you hear the point.

Now turning to chapter 5, I had read selected verses to catch some major themes.

There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth. You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. (Amos 5:10-11 NIV)

Amos is calling out corruption and economic practices that reinforce the wealth of the already-wealthy and make the poor poorer.

Amos warns against thinking you escape God's judgment. You might escape a lion only to run into a bear. Once you've dodged the bear and found safety inside, you get bitten by a snake waiting for you inside.

Amos rips apart the worship practices of the Israelites.

"Take away from me the noise of your songs..."

There's no reason to think that Amos was totally against the worship and sacrifice practices of his day.

It's that using them as a cover for injustice won't pass snuff. Using Christian language, symbols, and rituals as a cover for another agenda won't do.

Now for verse 24, which we've all been waiting for:

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:24 NIV)

Martin Luther King Jr. famously quoted this verse in his *I have a Dream* speech and at least four other times in other writings.

The two key words are justice and righteousness. I'll give your Hebrew lesson of the week.

Hebrew words usually have three consonants. From a basic root you can derive dozens of words by using different vowels, prefixes, or suffixes. Sometimes the word family sheds some light on the word.

The word for justice is *mishpat*. It might be a little hard to see at first, but the three letters of the root are the sh sound, a p (or f) and a t.

The verb form *shaphat* means to judge, decide a case, or act for justice.

A related word *shophet* means “judge,” describing people like Gideon, Deborah, or Samuel.

What this illustrates to me is that justice is not a concept – it’s an action. It’s something you do to set things right, and it requires discernment between truth and falsehood.

The word translated “righteousness” often appears alongside *mishpat* and has to do with being blameless in behavior, being a morally or ethically upstanding person.

Our embrace and pursuit of justice flow from our faith.

Who the president is or what the government does matters, *but* it does not change our loyalty to Jesus or ability to be faithful to Jesus.

We do not look to the president or the government as a Savior. There is only one Savior, and he earned that right by his nonviolence, his willingness to suffer, by his path that transforms both the sinfulness of our inner hearts and our outward way of life.

Politics at its core has to do with how human beings live together in this present world. When you look at it that way, the Bible – and Jesus – have a lot to say about politics.

But that doesn’t mean partisan politics. Followers of Jesus draw inspiration from the gospel message itself, rather than a straight-ticket pick of one of the ideologies that our culture gives us.

We have the option of gospel creativity as we imagine how Jesus would call us to live together, and we start by pursuing justice in the life of the church, before we lecture to the broader culture.

Drew Hart in his new book, *Who will be a witness?* says it this way:

*"The problem is that we are discerning what is good and righteous by allowing the powers and political parties that run society to dictate our sociopolitical agenda, instead of cultivating an imagination birthed out of the revolution of our Messiah and the new world God is bringing from heaven to earth."*¹

The million-dollar question is what Christian participation in the political process should look like.

¹ Hart, Drew G. I. *Who will be a Witness? Igniting activism for God’s justice, love, and deliverance*. Herald Press: Harrisonburg, VA, 2020, page 29

Some streams of the Anabaptist tradition, such as the Amish, shun that participation entirely. Our stream embraces responsibility for participating in our democracy in ways consistent with the values that flow from our faith, including holding office when there is no conflict with our peace teaching.

Our participation and our advocacy with elected officials should represent our earnest concern for the justice and well-being of everyone.

It should be motivated by a desire to love our neighbors in this aspect of life, as well as all others. It should not be a desire for political power for its own sake, nor an idolatrous trust in the government over the work of the Spirit.

For example, you might be deeply concerned about abortions, as well as the well-being of the would-be mothers, and your priority for life extends to opposing the death penalty. You might be concerned both with family values and with detoxing from our addiction to violence.

If pursuing justice requires good judgment, good judgment requires understanding the truth of a situation.

In our present moment, we have an epidemic of misinformation and conspiracy theories. What you choose to believe is an ethical issue. Misinformation, and belief in fantasy has dire consequences.

Our divisions and polarization are not always the result of such great differences in value, but completely different understandings of reality. The forces of misinformation are great enough to make it understandable that good people can be fooled.

My grandfather was someone I grew up deeply admiring. He could fix anything and was very resourceful.

We were amazed how into his 80s he worked to restore his parents' house, setting up a unique scaffolding system to paint the walls and pushing his family's comfort level when he re-shingled the roof.

He was a faithful Christian who lived simply and gave of his time and resources generously.

He also was vulnerable to misinformation -- taken in by bad investments in gold coin collections that ultimately lost him money. He also believed misinformation that president Obama was plotting a way to stay in office for a third term.

Judging between fact and fiction as crucial in our time. Because our faith calls us to bear witness to truth, we are called to search out truth as best as we are able.

Polarization, different sets of facts, and misinformation are not far from us. Among Christians, you will find different ways of reading the Bible. You might be feeling it in your relationships with family, neighbors, and people you do business with.

It's hard to know what to do with that. Yet one of the most important justice issues of today is to engage in hard and crucial conversations to earnestly seek out truthful conceptions of reality together.

In those cases where the disagreement is sharp, we often opt to be silent for the sake of avoiding conflict.

If you've tried preaching at another person you know that doesn't work. Or in frustration and because of our own feelings of fear and vulnerability, we cut ourselves off from the relationship.

It is a challenge to stay in relationship, seek to live at peace with all and to also speak the truth as we understand it from the perspective of our faith in Jesus.

I'll give a simple example. My dad is the worst person in the world at confronting people, which is where I get the same trait from.

Recently one of his biggest customers came in to the shop without a mask, even though the sign asks customers to wear one. He evidently does not believe in masks. Dad ordinarily would not say anything, but he finally had to tell him, my wife's in the hospital, this is serious, please honor what we've put on the sign.

A few simple guidelines I can offer are the following:

Listen first. Empathize with the feelings behind what the other says and validate them.

Be willing to say where you stand in a non-defensive way.

Be willing to say what you don't know or have questions about.

Find common ground or common values beneath the disagreement.

Back up what you say by the way you live your daily life.

Recognize that truth is complex and multifaceted. It's OK to not know everything. Be open to correction.

Be content with trusting that hard conversations may plant seeds, even though they seem ineffectual.

CONCLUSION

Justice and the pursuit of a greater understanding of the truth of a situation go together.

In all things, Jesus is our first and final authority. Our Anabaptist faith is a testament that nationalism and Christianity shouldn't go together.

Our story of past suffering – such as the harsh treatment of conscientious objectors during WWI and stigma of German language and culture -- is there not to keep our focus on ourselves, but to give us empathy for an outward focus on the struggles of others.

We may feel far removed from some of the events affecting our country.

Yet seeking truth and understanding we can do from wherever we are.

Let's not shy away from hard conversations, not necessarily with the goal to convince, but with the goals of listening, learning, and planting seeds.

Let's use our imagination and creativity to join God's work of pouring out rivers of justice and peace.

BENEDICTION

May God give you what you most need in the coming week:

Comfort if you are mourning.

Courage if you are afraid.

Wisdom if you are angry.

Praise if you are joyful.

May the peace of Christ be with you.