

## 2020 Amos and Worship

From Amos today: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and 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 peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.”

Good thing we have a piano and organ, I guess. But then Psalm 150 says: “Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.”

Which is it? Amos or Psalms? Do we sing or not? And with what instruments?

And what about those sacrifices, feasts, and assemblies to the Lord? The ones God said he hated? And if he hates them, what about Exodus 12 where the Lord says: “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations.” Or Jesus himself in Luke 22 saying, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” Or the author of Hebrews, saying, “Don’t be in the habit of not meeting together.”

Which is it? Do we gather or not, do we celebrate or not? Do we sing or not?

I will briefly risk re-opening the mostly unfruitful wounds the Worship Wars afflicted on us in the past decades. The Worship Wars, which aren't completely over, consisted of people across the aisles in the Church debating which instruments and style of music to use in Worship. One side would say, "there weren't any organs in the Bible, but there were drums and stringed instruments!" The other side responds, "Our songs and liturgies are time-tested and scriptural." The other side lobs back, "Psalm 96 tells us to "Sing to the Lord a *new* song." And the counterattack is, "Then why does it have to be sappy, unscriptural and repeated 30 times?" Spite begins to rise on both sides. So the one side says, "You squelch the Spirit and are out of touch with the youth." And the retort is, "Better than being a knock-off rock show with no scriptural depth."

Have I annoyed both sides sufficiently? Why bring up these wounds and arguments we have probably all heard? Because I think it has something to do with our reading from Amos today. You see, the "problem" the Worship Wars needed to solve wasn't actually about style or instrumentation or because the other side of the aisle hates the Bible or the Youth. The problems with Worship are substance and reverence. And those points weren't wholly ignored in the worship wars, but I do believe they were well hidden behind veils of volume and style, which, while relevant to the discussion of reverence, are tangential to the point.

Ephesians 5:19 “Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs *from the Spirit*. Sing and make music *from your heart to the Lord*.” I think this little verse from Ephesians perfectly encapsulates the solution to the worship wars. Worship ought be from the Spirit, Paul says. And how does the Spirit work? In the Word of God and the sacraments. So does worship detract or distract or contradict the Word of God? May we repent. Does it detract or downplay the sacraments, baptism and communion, for the sake of feelings, convenience, or entertainment? May we fight against such things. Let us think hard about innovation and smoke machines, lest we lose our substance and reverence.

But there is another pitfall. And it is no secret which side of the Worship Wars we lean here at Hope. We see value, reverence, and education in the liturgies we often employ here. But there is another pitfall because while the words proclaimed are scriptural, and of the Spirit, are they as Paul says: said and sung “From our heart to the Lord”? Ever said the Lord’s Prayer and found yourself five petitions in and have no recollection of saying them? Ever said that bold confession, the Creed, that people have died for, and not given a passing thought to what you are confessing or how it shapes your life? Ever seen the communion ware up there and thought, “Ugh, this service is going to be 15 minutes longer.” This is what we ought fight against. Reverence does not just apply to dis-respect, it also applies to “going through the motions.”

The people in Amos' day were doing the service, but simply going through the motions- or even worse, thinking that by doing the motions and saying the words they earned favor with God. Let us repent of such tendencies.

How do we do that? First, let us present the words in a way that we can understand.

Who knows what an "Ebenezer" is, or a "Kyrie"? Read those little footnotes and liturgy boxes in our hymnal and bulletin. So we need to understand the words.

Second, let us meditate on the words, chew them around, look a different way at them, focus on a different aspect each time – and there can be great growth in words we have spoken many times. It is a lack of reverence to go through the motions. So may we prepare our hearts for the Word of God here, and may that substance shape us as we leave and head out there.

The reality is, the body of Christ, the Church, has enough room for different styles of worship. How arrogant to think one's heritage is the only true worship. But how equally arrogant to discard all the Church has done before us as irrelevant. Both are true.

And so, brothers and sisters, where does that leave us? Firstly, it leaves us standing on the scriptural and confessional grounds that what is neither commanded nor forbidden in scripture yields way to Christian freedom. So the Church in Africa has drums, but does that mean they cannot worship (John 4) "in Spirit and Truth"? One

Church has dances (and we Lutheran's along with the Baptists shout "heaven forbid!"). Some sing more, some sing less. None of these necessarily exclude a congregation from sincere worship.

That doesn't mean it's a free for all, no, remember substance and reverence always apply. Nor does it mean you have to like each style. Nor is each style acceptable in each place as we are called to do things in order. What do I mean by that? Think of it this way: If you go to someone's house and they ask you to take your shoes off, is it kind or thoughtful to obstinately decline? Why cause scandals, distraction, discord in the congregation? Likewise, dancing in the aisle in our Church is a sure way to distract from the message – I would ask you to stop. But an upturned hand in prayer, why not? Or what of the children who do their dances and signs in this very sanctuary during chapel? Not a distraction, but joyful praise in that setting and service.

We drive the middle road, focusing on substance and reverence, the content of the words, the condition of the heart, and we seek not to distract from such things or put manufactured feelings or events over them.

Well, perhaps my foray into Worship Wars wasn't so brief after all: But now, back to Amos. Perhaps the "problem" in Amos isn't the services. Perhaps it's the substance, perhaps it is the reverence, perhaps it is the state of the hearts of the

people. The hearts of the people have gone after other gods assuming “as long as we do the festivals required in the law, we will be fine with that Yahweh God.”

But now the Assyrian army is surrounding them. So they cry to God to come bring justice, but God says, “I’m not so sure you want my justice. Because my justice is the army surrounding you and your idols.” You run from a lion and find a bear.

You run from Assyria and you will find a holy God who hates evil.

We hear this in our day and age too. People say, usually when they do something shameful, “Only God can judge me!” And I sit there thinking... “And he will.” At the end of the Church year we remember the Lord will return and judge the living and the dead. Ask the people of Amos’ day, who went from Assyrians to a holy God, a lion to a bear, a frying pan to fire. They know all about God’s judgments on evil. Let us repent of our evil. Let us repent of our faith-lives filled with so little substance and let us repent of our bored, irreverent hearts and minds. Repent because we will stand before the King and give answer to our pride, our grudges, our lust, our hatred, our apathy. And what will be our defense? That we did this and that service or work, that we were pretty good people? Amos’ people tried all of that.

What leg do we Worship Warriors have to stand on? None of our own. And so we lean on Jesus. He is the sacrifice that the Father does accept. He is the sacrifice that

cancel our debt, cleanses our dark and apathetic hearts. Jesus goes to the cross to forgive us for going through the motions. He is the sacrifice that accepted the judgment of a Holy God on our behalf that we might stand before him forgiven. He took upon himself our sins and said, "Judge me, not them." And that sacrifice was raised up in victory because it was accepted and we set free. God be praised.

By the power of the Spirit we have come to know he did this for us. So how do we respond? Why wouldn't we respond by gathering, hearing that good news, encouraging one another and singing songs of love, and victory, and by lifting holy Hands in prayer. How could we not stand and give true testimony to his Work for us, testimony full of substance and meaning even as he gives those same things to our lives? And maybe we begin to see that Worship, isn't so much about us at all. In the Church Service, who is being served? When the Gospel and gifts of God are given, it isn't us doing the work. It's Him. To worship God is to simply receive those gifts. So Luther and the reformers wrote, "[To] seek the forgiveness of sins in Him. This is the highest way to worship Christ."

The gifts of God are not manufactured or earned, like the people in Amos' day thought. They are freely given by a gracious God. They are received. Hebrews 12: "Therefore let us be grateful for *receiving* a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." But he does not consume his people, for his people are those

who have been served by his mercy and forgiveness. So on the day of his coming, or when he calls us to himself, we may stand before him forgiven and be brought to his celebration and I assure you, it won't be boring, and our hearts will not grow weary. Until then, continue to receive the goodness of God and in so doing you will render right sacrifices of praise! In the name of Jesus, to whom belongs all worship and praise, Amen!