

First Presbyterian Church of Redlands  
Rev. Cheryl Raine  
First Sunday in Lent – March 1, 2020

**Thematic verses for the entire Lenten Season entitled *Roll  
Down, Justice***

**Amos 5:21-24 NRSV**

- <sup>21</sup> I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
<sup>22</sup> 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.  
<sup>23</sup> Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
<sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

**First Reading - Romans 8:31-39 NRSV**

<sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us,  
who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but  
gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us  
everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's  
elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ  
Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of  
God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from  
the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or  
famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written,  
"For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

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<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Second Reading – *Speak a Word* by Bishop LaTrelle Miller**  
**Easterly**

“Life-giving God, may we speak a word of hope into someone’s spirit today; extolling the promise and potential in each new rising sun. May we speak a word of joy into someone’s spirit today; illuminating their worth, beauty, and blessing just as they are. May we speak a word of encouragement into someone’s spirit today; reminding them that they carry within themselves a power greater than evil. May we speak a word of love into someone’s spirit today’ freely offering the agape of God without condition. May we speak a word of peace into someone’s spirit today; offering the quiet strength of restraint over retort. Give us the courage to speak life-giving words into the lives of others.”

**The Message is entitled, *Naming Each Other***

There is a lot of noise in our world today and there was a lot of noise in the world during the days of Amos as well when King Uzziah ruled over the Southern Kingdom known as Judah and King Jeroboam ruled over the Northern Kingdom known as

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Israel. Their neighbors were contentious people, always in pursuit of more power, more land, and more people. It shouldn't sound all that foreign to our ears today, for the powerful today continue to grab for more power, more possessions, more land, and more control over the masses.

“[Yet,] more people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way,” writes Eugene Peterson in his introduction to the Book of Amos. He continues writing, “Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to humankind. The moment a person (or government or religion or organization) is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or a project, anything goes. The history, worldwide, of religion-fueled hate, killing, and oppression is staggering.”

This sobering introduction to the Book of Amos supports Peterson's claim that humanity needs prophets. So, God interrupted the daily routines of a grower of sycamore figs named Amos of Tekoa and commissioned him to speak a prophetic word to the people of God. Peterson writes, “The biblical prophets continue to be the most powerful and effective voices ever heard on this earth for keeping religion honest, humble, and compassionate. Prophets sniff out injustice, especially injustice that is dressed up in religious garb.”

Listen to the dressed up religious garb of Judah and Israel, for they dressed up and worshipped God weekly. Judah religiously worshipped, yet refused God's commands to love God and love neighbor. Judah swallowed the cultural lies of power and greed, while Israel only saw people as things, as ways of making money. Israel extorted from the poor and offered it in

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the temple. Israel trampled the penniless, while enjoying fine wine. The religious garb of Judah and Israel was all show, for it didn't translate into honest, humble, and compassionate living.

Now if you are wondering what religious garb looks like today, I suggest we listen again to the words of Amos as Peterson translates them for our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. God says through Amos, "I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religious projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music." I can't take the noise of your religious shows, O people of God. Friends, if our worship, if our gathering together this Sunday and every other Sunday doesn't translate into humble and compassionate actions that cultivate justice beyond the walls of this sanctuary then all God hears from us is noise.

And so, Amos confronts us. Amos asks us to take a long hard and honest look at ourselves and our worship, saying, "Does our gathering together for worship nurture honest humility and compassion among us and for the community and the world we are called to serve?" Do we even know what God wants from us as we walk out of this sanctuary and into our everyday lives? Amos makes it pretty clear according to Peterson, for God says, "I want justice—oceans of it. I want fairness—rivers of it. That's what I want. That's *all* I want."

"Roll down, justice. Let justice roll down, roll down like water and righteousness like a flowing stream."

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Yet, what stops us from acting justly in our everyday lives? What stops us from translating our worship of God into a lifestyle of humble and honest compassionate love and justice?

I suggest it is the noise of the world, both external noise and internal noise. First, let me begin by describing the external noise that influences our will. The noise of all that is not right in our world is loud. The decibels screamed through our media outlines often seem insurmountable – the abuse of power at the expense of those without power, the trafficking of humans for sex or cheap labor, systemic racism and all other “isms”, lack of fresh water for the global poor, inadequate health care options especially for the poor, global warming disproportionately impacting the poor, abusive fishing or hunting practices leading to extinction of species, not enough affordable housing or living wage jobs, hunger and inadequate nutrition, the prison industrial complex, and the list could go on and on. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the noise of all that is not right, believing that we do not have the resources to address these systemic issues. It is all too easy to let apathy take hold of us, allowing us to just curl up on our couches and take care of only ourselves.

Yet, when Dr. Miranda Bailey, a character on Grey’s Anatomy, extended hospitality to a youth from the streets who had received medical care a life was changed. The youth had turned 18, aging out of the foster care system with no place to go but back to the streets. Dr. Bailey’s heart was broken open and she responded with compassionate love and a life was changed. She didn’t change the broken system, but she changed a life.

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A man of Arab descent took to the streets of New York City amid tensions, given the mounting divisions in our country. He blindfolded himself and stood with a hand-written poster board that read, “Hello, my name is Karim and I am an Arab-American, like many people who are Black, Brown, Women, LBGQTQIA, Lantinx, Muslim, Jewish, Immigrants and others, I am very scared. We are anxious and uneasy in our own country and its difficult to see what lies ahead for us. But I have hope that I am safe with you. Together we can build a community of caring rather than one of fear. You can trust me to care for you no matter who you are, what you look like, or where you are from. Will you embrace me as willingly as I embrace you? Will you shake my hand and/or hug me and/or take a photo with me and post it as a sign that I am safe here with you? I trust you. #youaresafewithme and #safetyinnumbers.”

A three minute and fourteen second video on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/193125533>) showed the impact this one man had on others. I lost count of the number of people who hugged Karim, took photos with him or shook his hands. The video showed people of every ethnicity and age engaging Karim who remained blindfolded the whole time. His sign said, “I trust you,” and others did extend their trust. The video is far more powerful than my telling. Yet, I imagine that everyone who encountered Karim was changed by the encounter. The noise of our world blares that the systemic injustices before us are just too big, but when our worship translates into actions lives can be changed.

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Sometimes, though, it is not the external noise that keeps us from translating our worship of God into actions of humble and honest compassionate love and justice. Sometimes it's the internal noise. Noise that is so loud within us that we don't even believe we are worthy of God's love or that God could possibly use even us. You may know this noise because it flares up at inopportune times insidiously saying to you, "You are not good enough. You really don't have anything to say. You can't possibly make a difference anyways, so why bother."

When the internal noise is loud, we need to hear the conjunction used by Amos in our passage. Things are bad, O people of God, "But!" The noise of your religious trappings is deafening, O people of God, "But!" This verbal conjunction demonstrates that God redirects and redefines who we are. We are not the internal noise that says we are not good enough or the external noise that says we can't possibly make a difference. We are not our religious meetings, conferences or conventions. We are not our religious projects, pretentious slogans or goals. We are not our fund-raising public relations or image making schemes. We are not even our music.

Do you remember what I shared earlier about the origins of Lent? Lent was first a season of preparation for baptism. When we baptize an infant, child, youth or adult, a pastor asks, "With what name shall I baptize?" We each have a given name by our families. Yet, we are more than this family name. We are more than the many names given to us by the external or internal noise that tries to drown out who we are. We are each precious,

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honored, and beloved children of God. You are a child of God. I am a child of God. We are children of God.

And as Apostle Paul said to the church in Rome, “Nothing, and I mean **nothing** can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Or as Peterson translates, “Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way!”

God’s love never gives up on us. Even when we turn away, God pursues us. Even when the noise of our world blares uncontrollably, God is for us. If God is for us my friends, then nothing can separate us from God. Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not even the worst sins... None of this fazes us because Jesus embraces us with love.

When I hold my precious new granddaughter, as I did yesterday when her parents made a surprise visit to Redlands for the day, I get a glimpse of God’s amazing love for each of us. God loves each of us like loving parents and grandparents of a newborn.

Newborns are a needy bunch, but that doesn’t matter.

Newborns don’t do very much, but that doesn’t matter.

Newborns don’t talk or walk, but only screech and wail, but that doesn’t matter.

Love pours into Lindsey from her parents, from her grandparents, from her aunts and uncles. Love simply pours into her.

God simply pours love into each one of us, too. Will we claim this truth for ourselves, knowing that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God? Will we speak a

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word of hope or joy, encouragement or peace, courage or love to one another? We worship a life-giving God, let's be life-giving people!

Would you turn to someone near you, find out their name if you don't know it and say this to them, "You are a child of God." Make sure you say their name first and then say "you are a child of God." Let's speak into each other's lives, letting the truth of our belovedness sink deeply into all of our souls.