

Repentance in First-Person Plural

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Lent summons us to repentance, to a change of heart and behavior, to a turning around so as to walk in the way of discipleship. Too often Lenten traditions reduce repentance to tiny shafts of personal failures, narrow it to fractures of the individual, to concern with foibles of each alone. Too often practices of spiritual development encourage such insularity. Give up chocolate, eat less, or do something positive. Pray more faithfully, become more attentive to other people, be considerate of an irritating co-worker. Too often Christian repentance remains focused on me, my improvement, and my personal relationship with God. Of course, these acts and the attitudes that underlie them are good things that can help build up the body of Christ in the world. Any practice of repentance that awakens our spirits, increases prayer, and opens us up to God is good for the whole world. Hooray for such practices!

I. The Dangers of Myopia

But even when observed with faithful motives and humble attitudes, such focus on the individual alone is myopic. It leaves our blind spots in place, accentuates our insularity, and ignores our national sins. I think we Christians in the United States suffer from spiritual myopia, from a near-sighted view of God's world. We find it hard to see our lives in relation to life on the planet. What happens when Christians focus on the repentance of the individual is that our collective sin never appears before our eyes for repentance. Our national violence, preemptive warfare, assault on the environment, our social bias, greed, exclusion of the poor and the different, our arrogance toward other peoples, our overarching consumerism—these things remain invisible, out of sight, out of mind. When we repent of the sins that disturb our peace within the narrow walls of our cocoons, we remain unmoved by how the way we live harms God's other peoples and God's good earth. Maybe this refusal to see is willful, maybe it is careless ignorance of the other worlds down the block and across the globe. Maybe our arrogant insularity is our most pervasive collective sin.

II. Repentance in the Plural

Repentance of the individual is only one nourishing stream, a kind of tributary in a deep, wide river of the biblical tradition. What would repentance look like if Christians in the United States began to think of ourselves as called to compassionate engagement with all of God's people? Biblical repentance is not only the work of the first-person singular—of “I,” “me,” “mine”; it is a call to all of us together. Biblical repentance asks for turning around in the first person plural—of “we,” “us,” “our.” It calls for the contrition and regeneration of the entire community of faith.

How can preachers overcome the myopia that characterizes so much Christian thinking about repentance in churches in the United States? How is it possible to break through our blinkered vision to a larger, more biblical fire that places Christians in the world through and beyond the self? Can the call for repentance move from the singular to the plural?

III. Amos' Call for Communal Repentance

In our individual-oriented communities, the very notion of collective sin, the idolatrous turning away from God by all of us together, is a hard thing to preach, even to grasp. It is so difficult to imagine ourselves as one people and as a people co-responsible for the world with other peoples. The main Hebrew word for repentance is "*shub*," a verb that requires an about face, a getting back on the path, a walking with God. *Shub* is a favorite word of the prophets, those great preachers who use every rhetorical trick they can muster to wake up their communities to their collective sins. For the prophets, the world and its peoples are bound together under the governance of God who will not accept violence and mayhem even in warfare.

A. Respect Among Nations

The prophet Amos calls for repentance in the first-person plural. His concerns are international, his vision is global. He hears the word of God with the force of a lion's roar (3:8). That roaring voice blasts warnings upon all the people who do not live in the first-person plural, who do not recognize that the lives of others are sacred. He attacks the nations and city states around Israel for "three crimes and for four," that is, for complete, total transgressions (1:2-2:3). All of these dramatically numbered transgressions are war crimes with eerie echoes in our present war. Damascus invaded Gilead, "threshed" it, with "threshing sledges of iron" (1:3). It obliterated another land. Gaza and Tyre "carried into exile entire communities" and handed them over to Edom (1:6, 9). They made captives of whole peoples. The Ammonites "ripped open pregnant women in Gilead" (1:13). They destroyed a people's future and violated the most vulnerable among them. And Moab "burned to lime the bones of the king of Edom" (2:2). They executed the king of another nation and defiled his body.

"The Lion has roared: who will not fear?" shouts Amos.

"The Lord God has spoken: who can but prophesy?" (3:8).

This courageous preacher insists that God's rule extends beyond our own national interests to relationships among all people. And though the history of warfare may be both a history of heroic self-sacrifice and of the inevitable breakdown of ethical behavior, a breakdown glaringly evident in our present war, from Amos' viewpoint what is at stake is the blindness and insularity of the nations. And the core of such decline in human regard for other humans is the blindness and insularity that makes whole peoples choose their own security over the lives of others, a blindness that gives space for the festering, blistering abandonment of regard for life that war spawns. Amos accuses the nations of blindness and insularity in its war crimes. Is this not about us too? Can Lenten preaching of repentance open our eyes to the three crimes and four in defense of our alleged security committed in our names today?

Many challenges face preachers, not the least of which is to consider how they, too, participate in our culture of fear, our politics of self-protection, and our religious myopia that keeps the line of sight inward, insular, and singular. Biblical repentance addresses all of us. It may well be that Amos' fire and brimstone cannot serve as an effective call to repentance in this culture. It may be too harsh, perhaps too accusatory, to do much more than create paralyzing guilt or to build walls of angry resistance. But God's word in the book of Amos shows us who we are and points out our blindness, blindness that is like a cancer that might kill all in its way.

B. Respect Among All People

Amos' poetic voice probes the depths of his community's insularity. His concerns are domestic and internal. The selfish blindness of the leaders, the privileged, and all those who benefit from the nation's wealth are his target. He shows them who they are, how their vision is lethally short-sighted, and then cries out for repentance. The overriding collective sin that afflicts his people is their blind, arrogant self-focus, their inability to see past their own well-being, their own security, and the pleasures of their own lifestyle. On behalf of the God who made them, Amos demands that they understand they are part of the community. The failure to think and act in the first person plural is their fundamental idolatry, their turning away from God. It is of this they must repent. His theological starting point is that the believing community is a "we" and that the community is part of the larger community of all God's people.

These are what the community does:

They "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth"

They push the afflicted out of the way (2:7).

They oppress the poor

They crush the needy (4:1)

They hate the one who reproves in the gate

They abhor the one who speaks the truth (5:10).

They trample on the poor

They "afflict the righteous"

They push aside the needy at the gate (5:12).

Amos' violent language is more than a dramatic attention-grabber. It both replicates and reveals who they are. They are trampers, haters, afflicters, oppressors, crushers, pushers-aside. The ones they push away, the ones they keep out and trample upon are the poor, the righteous, and the truth-tellers. What the trampers and haters do not see and refuse to know is that their victims are their own people, one with them in the embrace of God. Amos reveals them to themselves in a microcosm of violence: they crush the head of the poor into the dust. They have forgotten their connections with any one outside their group. They are brutes. Are we like they?

Driving their actions is their sense of privilege, of chosenness, and of arrogant insularity. Amos describes their elegant lifestyle, what Mark Daniel Carroll R. calls a tourist's vision of the life of the wealthy.¹ They have a summer house, a winter house, great houses, houses made of ivory (3:15). They are the rich, "fat cows of Bashan," who live idle lives (4:1). They eat stall-fed meat, drink great quantities of wine, and anoint themselves with oil (6:4-6). But Amos' critique of their lifestyle is not an attack on enjoyment of life's material goods, of eating, drinking and living with beauty around one. The Old Testament honors the material world, applauds feasting, and insists that each family should have an ox, a fig tree, and a plot of land for itself. The overriding collective sin that afflicts Amos's people is their blind, arrogant self-confidence, their inability to see past their own well-being, their own security, and the pleasures of their own lifestyle while others languish, go hungry, and fail to flourish because of the ways the rich live.

Amos charges the elegant revelers with failure to see what is happening to the nation. They are not "grieved over the ruin of Joseph" (6:6). The Hebrew verb

translated “grieved over” by the NRSV translation carries a much stronger connotation than simple mourning. Amos is accusing them of not “being made sick over” the ruin of the nation. They are not viscerally, personally disturbed by the fracturing of their society. They have forgotten the covenant and lost sight of God’s governance of the world. They do not anguish about the poor, do not see their own inhumanity, do not grasp that their own violent destruction will inevitably follow their violent way of life.

To keep themselves safe in their insularity, they deprive religion of its bite. They force the religious group known as the nazirites to violate their ascetic practice and drink wine. They silence opposition by saying to their prophets, “you shall not prophesy” (2:12). Their worship services are beautiful, traditional rituals, solemn assemblies, proper burnt offerings and grain offerings, fatted animals, well-planned songs and melodies on the harp, but God declares them hateful, despicable (5:21-23). Their worship is for their own glory; their worship is a lie, empty, a self-serving show. Their solemn assemblies keep them blind in their insularity.

What God wants is “for judgment to roll down like the waters and justice like an ever flowing stream” (5:24).

To protect their interests they corrupt the legal system and the judgment made at the city gates. They turn justice to poisonous wormwood,” (5:7). They take bribes and “push aside the needy at the gate” (5:12). They say “Evil shall not overtake us or meet us” (9:10). These people who think they are safe from harm, protected by their own isolation and by rings of protection paid for on the backs of others—these “sinners of my people shall die by the sword” (9:10).

IV. The Call for Repentance

Amos speaks to them about repentance in second-person plural. “Seek the Lord and live” (5:6). He preaches about the way they live, hoping to crack open their hearts and minds, showing them how their life affects people who are not part of their inner circle, their particular group. He calls them back to God:

Seek good and not evil, that you may live
and so the Lord of Hosts will be with you;
Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate.
It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of
Joseph (5:14-15).

V. Our Lenten Repentance

With burning clarity Amos’s words come alive in our midst. The global village in which we find ourselves yields to a prophetic analysis akin to the vision of Amos. We live in the big houses, eat and drink like nobles; we trample the poor of the earth; we distort justice among the peoples; we hold tight-fistedly to our security and safety and protect our way of life; we silence truth-tellers and remove the sting from our faith traditions. I hear the violence of Amos’s language in the culture in which I am embedded: trampling the needy, pushing aside the afflicted, crushing the poor, afflicting the righteous. I see justice turned to wormwood in our courts with the suspension of habeas corpus, the silencing of opposition, and the cold indifference of some who think our security and the maintenance of the good life for ourselves and our children alone trump all other claims.

Then in our widening circles of relationship, I look at the way the United States interacts with other peoples of the world, the way we and other western powers lord it over others, try to dictate terms of commerce, pervert justice, and exploit food supplies, make deals with dictators, experiment with vaccines on the ill of Africa. The list is appalling.

Then I wonder why we Christians are not “made sick over the ruin of” our nation. Lenten repentance may not bring us to clarity about what to do; it may not even grant us a common interpretation of our sinful common life. But as long as we remain blind and insular, safe in our fortress world, focused on me alone, we cannot claim to be faithful worshippers of God. Maybe preaching about repentance in the first person plural involves waking us up to our true interconnections with God and with God’s people. Maybe it can light a flame of hope for those many among us who are already sick over the ruptures in our nation. Maybe days of repentance on behalf of our nation could show us that our calling is to be doers of justice and reconcilers in God’s world. Maybe, at the least, Lenten preaching of repentance can help us see that our worship is fundamentally and irrevocably connected to our relationships with all around. Maybe repentance in the plural can reinvigorate our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ in the world. Maybe it can help us see that we are the ones who need to *shub*, to turn around, to get back on the right path.

Amos tries to show his people that trust in anything or anyone other than God is false security. His calls for repentance do not use language of trust, but profound trust in God is implied. Our security rests not in our wealth, power, or armaments; it does not arise from bullying others into our service or into doing our bidding; it does not come from amassing goods in our barns while the rest of the world starves. True security lies in trust in the God who calls us together for right worship and for service to the world.

Amos’ words end with a vision of hope where community is re-established and life is lived in the plural:

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
And they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them,
They shall plant vineyards and drink from them,
And they shall make gardens and eat their fruit (9:14).

In those days to come, everyone will be fed; everyone will partake in the riches of the land. This utopian vision stands as promise that God’s people live in a world intended for all and that God is acting to save and restore. This vision anticipates life, renewed, regenerated, and recreated for us all in the plural.

Note

1. Mark Daniel Carroll, R. *Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective* (*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series* 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 182-305.