

# PARADE JUSTICE, RIVER JUSTICE

A Sermon on Amos 5:18-24—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart  
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1.

In tenth grade, I moved to Corpus Christi, Texas. The band directors for my new high school marching band asked me to play, as I had in my previous marching band, the quads, the four drums attached to an over the shoulders harness that weigh about 25 pounds. In mid-May the band marched in the Buccaneer Parade, a local tradition. Now by that time in late spring, southern Texas commonly experiences 90-plus degree temperatures and high humidity, and this afternoon was no exception. After we stepped off at the beginning of the 3.5-mile route that wound through the city, the band alternated between difficult drum cadences and Buster Poindexter's recent hit song. "Yes, Buster," I thought to myself as I sweat, "I AM feelin' hot, hot, hot! Stop reminding me!" I don't really remember the last mile of the parade. I just recall being relieved when it was over that there was water for us, but the flute players had crowded around the water, blocking the percussionists' and tubas' way.

Thankfully, soon after we got some water, we packed up our instruments, boarded the busses, headed back to school, changed out of our sweat-soaked uniforms, and returned to normal life. To march in the parade was a sacrifice of sorts but it didn't last that long.

2.

Our modern parades are the cultural descendants of two phenomena by my perspective: military parades and religious holidays. The military used marching to get their troops efficiently from one place to another, and to move forward in battle, with their loud music intimidating the enemy. Religious holidays like Carnival and Mardi Gras, as well as less revelrous ones, would bring people together for a day, maybe a few if it was a big deal. There would be a procession to a church, prayers,

worship, celebrations. Then the holiday ended and life continued on.

Amos was familiar with such kinds of festivals in his day. The Jewish tradition was already chocked full of festivals by the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC(E). Everybody got together to remember God, offer some animal as a sacrifice, then go back to their usual lives.

Amos was also familiar with a feature of the Judean landscape, called the wadi. Wadis are these places where for small periods annually, rain falls and the wadi beds rush with water for a few days. But then the water runs its course and the rest of the year it's a dry river bed, a gully, a reminder of the region's predominantly dry conditions.

One more thing Amos was used to, and that's Judah's complaints that the rest of the world was to blame for Judah's problems. Many Israelites believe that if God just came out for one day, for one legendary day of light and judgment, God would expose the injustice of the other nations, smite them, put them in their place and vindicate the people of Judah who have been the world's one exception of goodness.

This is some of the context for Amos' declaration in today's reading. Amos speaks to the people of Judah, in language that's supposed to remind them of a funeral lamentation, "If you want the day of the Lord, let me tell you that's a bad idea. The day of the Lord won't be all daisies and double rainbows for you, it won't shine light on your exceptional piety.

Amos continues, 'If God showed up right now God would probably expose the darkness in your hearts. If you think dealing with the other nations is dicey, God is even more dangerous!'

Amos also says, 'God told me it's time to stop it with the festivals and the assemblies.' 'God says, 'Turn away the marching bands and public displays

of devotion and mourning. I don't need your fancy parades or your candlelight vigils! I don't need your thoughts and prayers. Those come and go like wadis that swell then dry up. Wadi dah dah! Your brief moments of piety are flashes in the pan. They are no good to me now.' '

'You know what I do want?

'Just and righteous living.

'Let justice roll down like waters; let righteousness flow like a year-round, ever-flowing stream.

'I don't want lip service to justice that comes and goes like a parade. I want ever-flowing streams of righteousness and justice. **That** will get my attention.'

3.

I hear this today and it convicts me. I want to seek justice continually but I am better prepared in my ministry here for example to bring people together for a one-time vigil in the wake of a shooting than I am to persuade our politically diverse congregation to agree on how to respond to such shootings in a unified pursuit of justice. To be united in having thoughts and prayers can be easier than agreeing on what exactly to pray for.

We are so busy that even going to a parade for Veterans seems like a big ask. Unfortunately the Veterans parade last Sunday afternoon was rained on, which meant the usually sparse crowds were made even sparser to lift up our veterans (I bet that if there was bad weather on the afternoon of the St. Patrick's Day parade, people would still come out in droves, am I right?). Does this lessened attention to Veterans Day have to do with the dying out of World War II veterans, or because we simply don't care? And if we can't even go to a Veterans Day parade then will we be able to demand just health care for our veterans when it takes long, drawn out commitment to help? That's why they call it justice seeking, because justice isn't easy to find, it takes perseverance to push for

change when VA hospitals are ill-prepared to care for veterans; it takes iron will to make sure that traumatic brain injured and PTSD-suffering veterans get the medical, psychological and pastoral care they deserve.

Justice and righteousness require river-type constancy but we in our busy American lives tend to struggle to manage even a parade-length spurt of concern.

The United States is a wonderful country, the first to experiment in a capitalistic democratic republic, a place where individual freedoms and collective responsibilities are supposed to be held in balance. But the United States is comprised of imperfect humans like every other country. And right now many of us Americans are spending more of our time pointing the finger at the other half of the country and asking for God to smite them than we are spending time seeking justice together. I have a feeling that Amos would say a day of light and justice in the United States would expose the sins of all kinds. It seems to be happening right now in the sexual harassment and assault charges that envelope people from various backgrounds. Like there was in Amos' day, there's been a lot of bad news to go around now.

4.

The good news in today's reading is that through the prophet Amos, God points God's people back to real justice and righteousness. Justice, the equality of people in a communal sense, and righteousness, the just actions of an individual—God's people can realistically pursue them if they do so in on a consistent, ever-flowing basis. Israel can seek justice, Amos says, if it goes beyond lip service into substance. Now Amos was actually skeptical that Israel still had time to turn things around. He had seen how poorly the people of northern Israel had treated its poor and thought that it might be too late for this generation to make things right even if it did begin to consistently address oppression and inequality.

I have more hope for the world and the church today than Amos might have had for the world and Israel back then. In part I have hope that we can go beyond the episodic fits and starts of seeking justice and be reformed into a more just society. I have hope that the church has still strong footing on the kind of justice-seeking that can keep us bound in love and justice as one people. Just look at what this church has done and continues to do.

This church and five others saw the injustice of poverty and homelessness in the region and together formed the Combined Parishes Action Committee, which in turn formed the Beth El Shelter. It now shelters and feeds, empowers and seeks justice for people who have become homeless because of health reasons, financial reasons, and domestic violence reasons. No one church could do it all, but we became an ever-flowing stream of justice together.

The Emma Davis Medical Equipment Ministry about 14 years ago was at a crossroads. It had been supplying medical equipment for free to people in need, but the original leaders could no longer do it. So the outreach ministry led by people like Becky Tylutki reformed Emma Davis Ministry so that people would have different roles and people would take turns being on call, to pick up messages and meet with clients. No one person could be the ever-flowing stream of medical equipment, but people could be an ever-running relay seeking justice because of their faith in God.

Milford Food 2 Kids was formed in this church just last year when it became clear that no current organization felt it could consistently devote the time and effort needed to address child food insecurity. Social workers, teachers, and faith leaders knew the problem was there, but we weren't getting past the thoughts and prayers phase of responding. Then a simple conversation between Rev. Ashley and Michele Steinlauf convinced them to jump right in, not taking it on alone but inviting one person here and one

organization there, and then more and more until the movement has gained so much momentum that together we are feeding over 160 local students through what feels like an ever-flowing stream of non-perishable food items in and out of the Plymouth Building, week in and week out.

And today the youth groups complete their Home Is Where the Heart Is Freeze Out not to go home with business as usual but to be transformed into the next generation of young adults who continue the stream of service to people devastated by disaster and poverty across this country.

We're not just giving one-time lip service to how to be God's children and disciples of Christ, we're not just marching in a parade then going back to business as usual. We're banding together in ways that faith communities only can to be streams of righteousness and justice. We are quenching the thirst of those who have been sweating under the injustices of life, we are providing some respite and hope.

There's a never-ending flow of injustice in the world. What do we do about gun violence? Immigration? Economic injustice? Sexual assault?

I'm reminded of the story of the people who come to the bank of a river to find people bobbing up and down in the current, in danger of drowning. They pull the people out, but then find more and more people coming down the river. In addition to saving the people, they also feel obligated to find out who's throwing all the people in the river! In our faith lives, we can seek the immediate justice of charity, but such ministry leads us to confront what is causing the suffering we seek to alleviate. This brings us to deeper justice-seeking, the kind that requires even greater grace and determination than acts of mercy. But as long as we have faith in the one God, we cannot help but see all people as equal and deserving of justice.

Our common faith can be in God whose son marched triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey

and was unjustly marched out of the city of David with a cross on his back. Our common faith can be that this happened to Jesus so that on Easter morning he could be the means of God's ever flowing love and salvation, the living water that quenches every thirst and empowers us to love and serve with hope and an eye on God's justice, which binds all people as one.

"I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...Take away from me the noise of your songs...but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness an ever-flowing stream."

God invites us to become the drops that stream together into God's just and beloved community.  
Amen.