

Starting the New Year in the Words of Amos

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At the birth of a new decade, I start by opening my Bible which falls to the book of Amos. As I'm unfamiliar with the text, I read the short book with curiosity.

Amos 2:6-7 The Lord says, "The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and I will not forget. For they have perverted justice by accepting bribes and sold into slavery the poor who can't repay their debts; they trade them for a pair of shoes. 7 They trample the poor in the dust and kick aside the meek. And a man and his father defile the same temple girl corrupting my holy name."

Amos 5:4 & 24 The Lord God says to the People of Israel, "Seek me and live." 24 I want to see a mighty flood of justice – a torrent of doing good.

Wow, that's quite a message to start the new year.

Amos was a lowly shepherd, unaccustomed to hearing personally from God. Yet, God appeared to him in a vision, speaking of things that were going to happen to his beloved nation of Israel because of their wickedness.

This vision was powerful. The Lord roared like a ferocious lion and the pastures of Mount Carmel withered and dried; it was so heart breaking, the Bible says that all the shepherds mourned.

Amos was so moved from this encounter that he prophesied God's message into the northern part of Israel where the people were experiencing exceptional achievements and great fortune. At a time when the people should have been the most generous with their neighbors, they were more selfish. In their wealth and success, they took advantage of those who were suffering and going without.

The era of prosperity described in Amos reminds me of the economic affluence we're experiencing today. Unemployment is the lowest it's been in nearly fifty years. The stock market is experiencing the longest running bull market we've ever had in U.S. history. Production is running at full tilt and growth is recognized through new construction and ongoing development.

Even though the people of Israel offered sacrifices to God, he knew from their actions they were not sincere. Even though God had saved them from bondage in Egypt they'd forgotten his promises and were worshiping their heathen idols and Kaiwan, their god of the stars.

Even though we Christians celebrated the birth of Christ barely a week ago, we attend church each week and say our prayers every day, yet the daily news cycle is filled with people hurting

one another. Though we gladly tout our advances in medicine and technology, Kentucky ranks sixth of least educated states in the U.S. Even with our proud agrarian heritage in Kentucky, one in four of our children are living in poverty. There are thousands in our own community hurting from a lack of food and a place to sleep, yet we find ourselves too busy, so we turn a blind eye to their suffering.

It is easy to get comfortable in our day-to-day lives when things are going so well. This reading of Amos clangs a resounding alarm that we must never become complacent. We, God's beloved children, must obey his teachings. We must love our neighbor – not just in prayer and words of interest – but in meaningful actions. How can we be truly happy if others are suffering?

God calls upon each of us to serve where and as we're able. He goes further by quipping each of us with talents, so explains Paul in his letters to the Ephesians. We are called. We are equipped. Let us greet the new year with action taking the place of idleness.

Let us love one another in joyful giving.