

I. Advanced Organizer

A. Seeing the problem that many others don't see

1. have you ever had that kind of experience?
2. often people living in the liminal spaces have them
3. Ghost Ship fire
 - a) **As most of you probably know, here in the East Bay, in nearby Oakland, just over a week ago a fire broke out in a warehouse during a concert, and 36 people lost their lives.** The Ghost Ship was a live/work warehouse space for the underground arts scene. And this tragic event has raised all kinds of questions, particularly for those who haven't been familiar with the arts community that inhabits these spaces.
 - b) Much of the mainstream coverage of the event has focused on the nature of this space; that it was an unpermitted warehouse not zoned for residence and performance. In a tweet just a couple of days after the event, Oakland City Council President Lynette Gibson McElhaney decided to tweet: “#ghostshipfire reveals a lot of complex issues. #OakCity capacity, anarchist rejection of regulation, lawlessness as a lifestyle, hsgcrisis.” And while she was right to identify that there is a complexity of issues here, to call the artists involved lawless anarchists doesn't acknowledge the full reality of the situation that many of those who perished are living in.
 - c) Danielle Thys is a local writer who identified a central issue in a post on Medium this way:
 - (1) *In the ever more culturally impoverished United States, being an artist is staggeringly more difficult than in numerous countries where artists are supported and celebrated as culture makers and shapers, not derided and characterized as self indulgent hacks and slackers unless their single hits platinum or they get millions per role.*

In Germany, \$20 per taxpayer goes toward arts funding. In the US, that's a whopping \$0.43. Per year. In the UK, annual funding for museums alone is around \$728 million. That's nearly 5 times the entire \$146 Million budget of the US National Endowment for the Arts. Arts Council England also receives both National Lottery funding and direct government ('grant-in-aid') funding that totals roughly \$768 million. The budget of the French Ministry of Culture is more than \$10 Billion — yes — with a “B”. Northern Ireland, with its population of less than 2 million people, awards over \$21 million annually for arts, literature and theatre projects. In South Korea, the Culture Ministry committed over \$50 Billion(!) toward the development (and often training and housing) of Korean musicians, performers and artists with a goal of proudly promoting Korean arts and culture abroad...

Mexican artists can pay their taxes with artwork in an 'art for amnesty' type of exchange....Among other sizable benefits for artists, Finland allocates \$45 million toward the arts for its 5.3 million citizens. We are bested by Uzbekistan and the Balkans.

The list goes on and on.

4. In a similar vein, local journalist Sarah Burke reported on the lack of support for artists in Oakland specifically this week for the Washington Post.

- a) *Artists have long been among Oakland's populations most vulnerable to displacement. Despite the fact that Oakland's art scene is a major draw for developers, representation for artists in city government has been anemic for many years, leaving them defenseless. The city has not had an arts commission since 2011, and the cultural affairs department, which had 13 employees in 2001, was at just three full-timers and one part-timer earlier this year. In August, [Mayer Libby] Schaaf hired a new Cultural Affairs Manager, outfitted with a budget of \$900,000, but he has yet to begin visibly making moves.*

Oakland's housing market is the fourth most expensive in the country... The meager income of artists, even those who work minimum-wage jobs to supplement their practice, is barely enough to hang on.

5. The crunch of the skyrocketing cost of living is apparent to anyone who lives here. **But the unique burden that that poses on creatives, and the unique solutions that folks feel forced to pursue are not always known to those outside the vulnerable communities.** It shouldn't be that 36 young creative people have to lose their lives for the system to pause and say there's a problem.
6. But often this is what happens when you are in a place of seeing a problem many others don't see. You bear the burden of seeing something other's don't.
7. **Amos was a minor prophet who had that kind of burden**
 - a) in fact his name meant "to bear a burden"
 - b) we are in an Advent series on longing; sitting with the minor prophets in our longings, in our awareness of the darkness
 - c) today we are considering head-on the issue that is at the heart of so much of the prophets' longing: the longing for justice
8. **Amos prophesied at the beginning of the prophetic era.** Contemporary of folks like Isaiah and Micah if not a little before them chronologically. **And he had the unique burden of coming from Judah and being sent to prophecy in Israel.**
 - a) They had had their version of a **church split when the kingdom split**, and the Israelites worshiped at **Bethel** instead of Jerusalem. **Amos went there to prophecy.**
 - b) A lot of the prophets had some sort of vocation that was related to the Jewish religion, but Amos was unique. He was a farmer from Judah, that God had given a vision to. **A vision of the judgement of God that was coming to the nation of Israel if they didn't change course.**
 - c) **It was a problem that no one else saw.** Israel was prosperous. There was **financial provision**. It was a boom time. There was **active religious observance**. The festivals were well attended. The musicians were good. The sacrifices were performed with pomp and circumstance. People thought God must be pleased with it all. But **Amos has a big wake up call to deliver.** He was given the burden of waking people up and helping them see that things were not as happy as they thought.
 - d) Not gonna lie, Amos is a strong, tough little book. Amos tells it like he sees it and doesn't hold punches. Today we're gonna take a look at one passage in the heart of the book that really lays out what's at stake here and how God seems to feel about it. We'll take it in three chunks. Here's the first.

II. Amos 5:10-13

***The Israelites hate anyone who arbitrates at the city gate;
they despise anyone who speaks honestly.***

11 Therefore, because you make the poor pay taxes on their crops

*and exact a grain tax from them,
you will not live in the houses you built with chiseled stone,
nor will you drink the wine from the fine vineyards you planted.*

*12 Certainly I am aware of your many rebellious acts
and your numerous sins.*

*You torment the innocent, you take bribes,
and you deny justice to the needy at the city gate.*

*13 For this reason whoever is smart keeps quiet in such a time,
for it is an evil time.*

A. God is sending Amos to say to those who are doing well in Israel, **just because you are doing well, doesn't mean all is well.** You've got some major problems. You have not kept your part of our contract, our covenant.

1. The wealthy class has become wealthy at the expense of others.

a) "because you make the poor pay taxes on their crops..."

(1) regressive taxing of those who can't afford it. Taxing those who are working hard so the wealthy can live in luxury

b) More on this in Amos 2:6b-7a

***"They sold the innocent for silver,
the needy for a pair of sandals.***

***7 They trample on the dirt-covered heads of the poor;
they push the destitute away"***

(1) This is referring to the practice of debt slavery. The folks in question were "innocent", because probably the only "crime" they had committed was being unable to pay back a loan or an exorbitant interest rate on a loan.

(2) In the ancient world this was a common practice, but God intended for it not to be an exploitive one. He had commanded that every 7 years, they release the debts and restore the slaves. But this wasn't happening. So income equality grew to an extreme, with oppression of the vulnerable at the center of it.

2. Not only were there exploitive practices, but their system of justice was failing.

a) The city gate was where issues of justice are to be handled. But **clearly the system favored those who continued the exploitation** rather than challenge the corruption. Amos says, "The Israelites hate anyone who arbitrates at the city gate; they despise anyone who speaks honestly." Later he says, "Whoever is smart keeps quiet." **Who wants to be a whistle blower? It's costly. Perhaps this was why God had to send someone from another nation.** A person who had no privilege, no stake per se in Israel, and so would have the guts to challenge the system. Nothing to lose.

B. **As people of faith when we're confronted with blatant injustice, it can be painful.** When we hear about the brutalization of people of color, when we hear about acts of violence threatened or acted upon our Muslim brothers and sisters or our trans friends, or when we hear about how the cost of housing has pushed our young artists to live in places that are sub-standard, even dangerous, we don't know what to do with it.

C. We need to know that **God cares about this.** That he sees this crap and he's not just gonna keep quiet and act like it's fine. To all of us in that place of absorbing how bad things are and wondering where God could possibly be with all this stuff going down, Amos is hear to announce that **God sees all the injustice, and he's not cool with it.**

D. **Instead Amos reveals (Point 1): Success at the expense of the vulnerable is not success. It is injustice, and it is counter to the heart of God.**

E. This brings us to our next excerpt.

III. Amos 5:14-20

14 Seek good and not evil so you can live!

Then the Lord, the God who commands armies, just might be with you, as you claim he is.

15 Hate what is wrong, love what is right!

Promote justice at the city gate!

Maybe the Lord, the God who commands armies, will have mercy on those who are left from Joseph.

16 Because of Israel's sins this is what the Lord, the God who commands armies, the sovereign One, says:

"In all the squares there will be wailing,

in all the streets they will mourn the dead.

They will tell the field workers to lament and the professional mourners to wail.

17 In all the vineyards there will be wailing,

for I will pass through your midst," says the Lord.

18 Woe to those who wish for the day of the Lord!

Why do you want the Lord's day of judgment to come?

It will bring darkness, not light.

19 Disaster will be inescapable,

as if a man ran from a lion only to meet a bear,

then escaped into a house,

leaned his hand against the wall,

and was bitten by a poisonous snake.

20 Don't you realize the Lord's day of judgment will bring darkness, not light—gloomy blackness, not bright light?

A. Harsh. **This is how passionately God is committed to ending injustice.** He cannot tolerate it. It makes his blood boil.

B. The outcome of injustice is inescapable disaster. It can't be averted.

C. **And yet, there's an invitation.** Within Amos' dark words is a plea. It is not only doom. "Seek good and not evil so you can live."

1. **God will be with you if you stand against injustice.** If you participate in the reversal of this injustice, God will be with you.

2. Elsewhere in Amos, there's a picture of God wanting to annihilate Israel in various ways, and Amos begs him not to, and he relents. He will find another way.

3. God's heart is for his people to turn, not to be destroyed. **He wants to wake them up so they can participate in redemption.**

4. **This reminds me of how I feel about my kids and their behavior.** I want to warn them and help them make good choices. Don't want to have to impose harsh discipline on them, even though sometimes it's only way.

D. **Point 2: Because God is good, God despises the evil of injustice, and is committed to ending it. God also longs for all of us to play a role in his work of restoration and redemption.**

E. Amos isn't done. One more chunk of this passage in the heart of his book we're gonna look at.

IV. Amos 5:21-24

21 "I absolutely despise your festivals!

I get no pleasure from your religious assemblies!

22 Even if you offer me burnt and grain offerings, I will not be satisfied;

I will not look with favor on your peace offerings of fattened calves.

23 Take away from me your noisy songs;

I don't want to hear the music of your stringed instruments.

24 Justice must flow like torrents of water,

righteous actions like a stream that never dries up.

A. Point 3: Worship without justice is not worship that honors the heart of God.

1. God can't stand the hypocrisy of religious observance that's disconnected from God's heart.
2. Jesus, quoting Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."
3. Not some new liberal theology. This is there from the beginning. Care for the widows and orphans. Care for the vulnerable among you has been a consistent theme in what God is calling people to. Society is judged by how it treats most vulnerable.

B. Waking up of the church today?

1. **More and more faith leaders of color calling followers of Jesus to participate in justice work. Christena Cleveland is one of these voices.** She is a scholar, writer, professor and activist in the church. This week she began on her blog a new series she is calling, "**How to be last: A practical theology for privileged people**". Christena talks in that post about Jesus' call **not to equality between people, but to equity**. She explains the difference as she sees it, this way., 'Jesus doesn't want everyone to be treated equally (e.g., treated the same); Jesus wants everyone to be treated equitably (e.g., each person is given what they uniquely need in order to fully participate in the kinship and mutuality of the kin-dom of heaven).' With that in mind she paints this picture, "Many privileged people incorrectly believe that a just world looks like a round table at which everyone has an equal seat and voice. But Jesus is showing us here that the table is not round nor is it guided by the law of equality. Jesus' table is oval, there's a clear head (where the oppressed people sit) and tail (where the privileged sit), and above all it's guided by the law of equity."
2. **This is not a lesson that much of the church is ready to hear.** I come from a church background in which most of the leaders have been **white men who are strongly empowered**, if not fully authoritarian in their leadership. What Christena is calling for is completely counter to how these systems are built. But what matters more? Our systems and structures, or the kin-dom of heaven, as she calls it.
3. **But being a part of this matters. The stakes are high.** There are many who wonder if the church has any witness left. 80% of white evangelicals voted to elect a white male who is highly empowered if not fully authoritarian, often at the expense of many vulnerable people. And yet the church gathers every Sunday in worship and prayer, even as some turn a blind eye to the oppression the marginalized experience. In this context, Amos reminds us: Worship without justice is not worship that honors the heart of God.

V. So where do we take our awareness of injustice, on whatever level we're aware?

A. Commit to bearing the burden of the struggle to bring justice.

1. Doing the painful work of discerning if we are experiencing success at the expense of others. Are we participating in injustice in that way?
2. This may mean speaking prophetically; saying what you see to those who don't see and don't want to see.
 - a) Amos got pushback. We see it later in the book, when a priest in Bethel ridicules him and tries to send him away for prophesying against them. But ultimately, Amos was speaking truth, whether those he was speaking it to wanted to hear it or not.

B. Look for practical ways to participate in the reversal that is at the heart of justice work.

1. Video of Christina Cleveland on Solidarity with the Oppressed

2. What difficult places might Jesus be calling you to step into in the next year?

C. Look to Jesus to be your hope and guide.

1. Eight hundred years after Amos spoke these words, our sacred stories tell us that a messenger of God, an angel, appeared to a young virgin in Nazareth, and told her that she would become pregnant with the child born of God. The one who was sent to bring healing and freedom to the world. And that young woman understood in a unique way what that meant. She was not a person of power or privilege. She was from a minority ethnic and religious group in her day. She was from a small town, not an important city. She was poor. And she was an unmarried woman. It doesn't get a lot more disempowered than that. And yet, God had come to her in the form of an angel, saying 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God!' Listen to the prayer she then prayed.

a) "My soul exalts the Lord,

47 and my spirit has begun to rejoice in God my Savior,

48 because he has looked upon the humble state of his servant.

For from now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 because he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name;

50 from generation to generation he is merciful to those who fear him.

51 He has demonstrated power with his arm; he has scattered those whose pride wells up from the sheer arrogance of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up those of lowly position;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering his mercy,

55 as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

2. Even before she was greeted by shepherds or star-followers from a distant land, before she held her baby in her arms, before she saw him develop and grow in wisdom and character, Mary understood what Jesus must be. That he would be the answer to injustice. That he would be the one who'd bring down the mighty from their thrones and lift the lowly.
3. She was right.
4. He's the one who made clear the first would be last and the last would be first.
5. He's the one who said when you feed the hungry, you give drink to the thirsty, you invite in the stranger, you clothe the naked, you care for the sick, you do those things for me.
6. He's the one who took his willingness to get uncomfortable for the sake of others all the way to the cross. Who was more committed to bring renewal and restoration than he was committed to his personal safety.
7. He is our hope to see justice and to participate in it now and through eternity. Amen.

Pray to end.