

Staying the Course

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“Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.” – Amos 5:14

Robert Frost famously said that “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / they have to take you in.” I had a home like that once. I had to go there when I was an eight-year-old whose parents had both died. I had to go there and they more or less had to take me in. Somebody did. I left that home when I was eighteen and I've rarely gone back. Homes like that, and they are many, are often cold and difficult places. The dry hand of duty rests on such homes, and everybody in them feels the burden of someone “having to go there.”

That's the antithesis of what home is supposed to be. A little later on in Frost's poem, another speaker says about home, “I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve.” You shouldn't have to deserve home. Home is the place someone has provided for you because you are loved, even if that someone is God, even if that someone is yourself.

Frost's poem is speaking about our physical homes, but what about our spiritual homes? Where is it that we belong, where God has prepared a place for us and welcomes us and is waiting to dwell with us?

And what happens when we no longer feel at home at home? Where do we turn and what do we do when the moral universe that we thought we knew and understood seems to be giving way, and the building blocks of society seem to be crumbling? What do we do then?

The text for this morning's sermon is the fourteenth verse of the fifth chapter of the book of Amos, “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.”

If you've experienced your physical or spiritual home as a distant and dutiful place, or home as an unfamiliar place, or home where what was once familiar now feels strange and bewildering to you; or home as a place where you face unrelenting criticism, or home as a place of unpredictable or even predictable violence, or home as a hollow shell that echoes with love that departed long ago, then may I offer you a word from the Lord this morning in the words of the prophet Amos, who lived 850 years before Jesus. Amos told his religious contemporaries, and he tells us, his religious descendants, what to do when the world seems to be coming apart and you no longer feel at home in it: stay the course. Keep doing what we know God has always called us to do: seek good and not evil, that we may live and that the God of hosts may dwell with us.

Amos lived in a time when Israel was no longer feeling like home to him and to many other faithful Israelites. The Israel that Amos had grown up with and thought he knew was a place of ideals, where people aspired to live into the calling that they believed their ancestors Abraham and Sarah had received from God many years before: “I will make of you a great nation,” God had said to Abraham, “and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . . and in you all the

families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Amos understood himself and his people to be the heirs of that call and that mission. That mission was given shape by the great Hebrew teacher and leader, Moses, who gave the Israelites divinely-inspired instructions after they were freed from Egyptian slavery and on their own, with the freedom and responsibility for living into their calling. Moses gave them instructions so that they could build what one of our own leaders, Lyndon Johnson, many centuries later would call “the great society” – a society free from poverty, a society that cared for the vulnerable, and a society that acknowledged and renounced its own racist and discriminatory past.

Those were ideals and they were high, and it was going to take a lot of effort and commitment to achieve them, but that's the course we set for ourselves once upon a time. Our society once aspired to greatness and generosity of spirit, but it seems that we've turned our back on those kinds of ideals now, and many of us are feeling as bewildered and as homeless as Amos felt 2,800 years ago, when he no longer recognized his own people. To use Robert K. Heinlein's language, many of us are feeling these days like strangers in a strange land.

Amos, also, felt out of place. He was feeling lost and angry at what he saw developing, across decades and even centuries, in the northern part of his country. Israel had once been a nation of small family farms, where people shared with one another and helped one another through good times and bad. People weren't rich, but they got by, and such wealth as their society had was pretty evenly distributed. Of course some had a bit more and some had a bit less, but the disparity wasn't huge.

That was the Israelite society that Amos had heard about and even experienced from time to time, but increasingly that kind of balanced, egalitarian society was being pushed aside. Wealth was being concentrated in the hands of a few, which made them very powerful, which, in turn, allowed them to use their laws not to provide justice but to further oppress the people whose labors had made them rich. That's early on in this morning's reading from Amos: “You that turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground!” Wormwood is a bitter plant, and Amos used that image of bitterness to describe the experience for ordinary people who have to watch their laws and courts and legislatures being turned into instruments of oppression and manipulation and deceit.

Amos went on, “They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.” In Amos' day, the city gate was the law court, where complaints were heard and justice was supposed to be rendered. And if it wasn't, it was the responsibility of every Israelite who passed in or out of that gate to appeal any unjust decision that they learned of – they were a nation of priests, after all – and every Israelite was obliged to reprove and to speak the truth of what was really going on, regardless of what was broadcast as the official version. But those in power and those who supported those in power didn't want to hear such reproof and such unpalatable truths.

However capable the controlling elite were in turning public hearings into charades for preserving unearned wealth and power and privilege for a few at the expense of the common good, prophets like Amos still believed in the truth – in the unadorned, unvarnished, un-spun truth – that rested on facts.

In 2016, the editors of the Oxford Dictionaries chose the hyphenated word “post-truth” as their word of the year, and we're told that we live increasingly in a post-truth world. Facts don't matter anymore. Lies persist as part of our public discourse no matter how many times they've been demonstrated to be untrue. The birthers still keep the lie alive that Barack Obama isn't an American citizen, no matter how many independent pieces of evidence are produced to show that he was indeed born in Hawaii.

And we now have a president who has called America's free press "the enemy of the people." The last president who treated the press with such contempt was Richard Nixon, and we know how that presidency ended and why. Richard Nixon was a liar and the press exposed him as a liar and he hated the press for doing so – he abhorred the truth, in Amos' words – and when a major newspaper like *The Washington Post* has to fact-check everything a president says for its accuracy and truthfulness, you know we're again in a very bad place – "an evil time" as Amos called his own.

In such a time, Amos went on, the prudent will keep silent. They will keep their head down. They will keep their mouths shut. They will keep whatever reservations and misgivings they may have to themselves. That's what the prudent will do in evil times.

But the Bible isn't about the prudent; the Bible is about the faithful, and the faithful don't go along to get along. Amos was one of the faithful, and, like Amos, the faithful speak up, they speak out, and they resist. They tell the truth. They return, again and again, to that place which is our spiritual home – the eternal, uncreated Word of God made flesh in Jesus the Christ – and they imitate his life by resisting the lies, resisting the spin, resisting the tranquilizing crumbs that fall from the masters' table, and resisting whatever thuggery and bullying may become the political fashion.

The heirs of Abraham and Sarah, called to greatness and goodness, seek good and not evil. There's nothing new in that. The heirs of authentic Judaism and Christianity stay true to their spiritual roots – the ideals of justice, mercy, peace, and truth for all of God's creation and not just for a part of it. They do so in order to become a blessing to the world so that the world can, in turn, become a blessing to itself.

The spiritual heirs of Abraham and Sarah, the spiritual heirs of the prophet Amos, and the spiritual heirs of Jesus the Christ have been shown by a loving and gracious God what is good, and so they stay the course. They do not panic and they do not despair. They do not adopt the tactics of the underhanded or the desperate. They resist the temptation to laugh at the distorted images in the fun-house mirrors.

The English jurist Edmund Burke is credited with saying that the only way for evil to win in the world is for enough good people to do nothing. If we heed the words of the prophet Amos, who told us to seek good and not evil, we will not be doing nothing. We will be actively engaged in the struggle. We will be doing what God has called us to do all along. We will stay the course that God has charted for us, and in so doing, we will be in that place that is our spiritual home.