

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Our Many Storied Lives”
Amos 1:1-2; 5:4-7, 21-24; 7:12-13
November 12, 2017

The Church today has a problem. And it's not just one church or another. All of us share this problem. And it's not a new problem. It's as ancient as the story of humans gathering together to worship God.

But in order to understand our problem you have to first understand something about the nature of humanity. And that is this: ***we humans are storied creatures.***

We don't just like stories. ***We live stories.*** And by that I don't mean that your life will become its own story...which is true in its own way.

But what I mean is that there are stories in the air we breathe... stories that are bigger than us, that are living themselves into us and out through our lives. ***And most of the time, we are completely unaware of it.***

There are powerful stories working on us in all kinds of hidden ways.

They shape your self-understanding,
they shape what is important or not important to you,
they shape the decisions you make on a daily basis, even little decisions like what to eat and what clothes you're going to put on today.

And they shape the big decisions you make... like who you'd consider marrying and who you'd not consider marrying,
or whether or not to go to college,
or what to do with the money you have,
or what career you might have.

We don't recognize it most of the time. But there are these larger stories... that are floating around in the air we breathe... that are shaping our very lives.

I could give you all kinds of examples, but I'm going to name just a few because they are going to help us connect with what is going on with Amos.

The American Revolution is a story that shapes every one of us who grew up in the US, whether we know the story or not. It's in the air we breathe. There's a story about the role of government, and taxes, and a story about independence, and self-determination... that does more than fill our history books. ***It actually shapes our imaginations and how we see the world...how we live our lives.***

That story creates a lens through which we see reality.

Which creates unseen pressures and ideas for us to live out that story in our own lives. It's a story that wants to live its way into us and out of us in our particular life.

Another one of our **cultural stories is the American Dream...** which has all kinds of interrelated versions, from
life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,
to success, power, and the pursuit of pleasure.

These are narratives in the air we breathe. They are lenses through which we see reality.

Every TV show and movie connects to a handful of our cultural stories,
and every commercial and advertisement is telling you another story... a story they want to
work its way into you and live its way out through your behavior.

And here's the thing: Not just one, but all these stories are working on us, and trying to live
themselves out in our lives.

We humans are storied creatures. We don't just like stories. We live out these stories,
stories that are in the air we breathe.

And even though we are unaware of it most of the time,

they are shaping our values.

They are shaping the decisions we make.

They determine how we interpret our world.

They create these lenses in front of our eyes fundamentally coloring how we see our lives
and the world around us.

Are you with me?

Are you catching what I mean when I say we are storied creatures?

It's something that's part of human nature.

It's part of how our brains construct meaning, and identity, and self-understanding.

It's simply unavoidable.

But it's important to recognize because underneath all that there is a problem.

Anyone who has ever worshiped a god of any kind has a story about that god. And that
story is also working on them. It's another one of the many stories in their life that wants to be
lived in them.

It's true of every religion.

And it's certainly true of our faith in Christ.

The gospel is essentially a story.

Jesus came and embodied a new story about God. A story about the Kingdom of God, which
was his phrase for describing ultimate reality – ultimate story.

When Jesus uses the phrase, "The Kingdom of God" he's talking about the way things really
are, if you could take off all the other lenses through which you see the world.

If we could push aside all the other stories... it's what would remain so clear for us. ***The
Kingdom of God is Jesus' story of ultimate reality.***

The Kingdom of God is the story that Jesus embodies, and lives, and describes...and for us
in the church who are trying to follow Jesus, it's become another story that is trying to live itself
through us.

But the truth is, ***it's only one*** of the stories that we are living out.
Which means.... it's ***only one*** of the many stories that are shaping our
values,
the decisions we make,

and how we interpret our world.

Which takes us right to the root of our problem for the church: ***Despite what we tell ourselves, most of the time the gospel is not our primary story.***

The Kingdom of God... is almost always the 2nd or 3rd or 4th lens through which we see the world around us.

It's a huge problem for the Church today.

And it's the same problem that is plaguing the church in Amos' day.

And since it's so hard for us to recognize, Amos doesn't hold anything back.

He walks right into church in Bethel one day...which is a bit like going to the National Cathedral... And he climbs up on his soap box and he tries to clear out the clutter of all the other stories.

But to understand that, I need to tell you more about Amos' story.

Amos lives and dies in a time when Israel has divided into two kingdoms. The southern kingdom is Judah and their capital is ***Jerusalem***.

It's the ancient holy city where the temple is.

So up in the ***northern kingdom***, when they split, they no longer had Jerusalem. They needed their own holy city, their own place to worship God. And what better place to make their national center of worship ***than Bethel?***

Even at that time, it was already an ***ancient*** holy place. Their great ancestor ***Abraham*** built his first altar there.

A few generations later, ***Jacob*** (Abraham's grandson) has that dream where there was a ladder that reached from there on up to heaven. And there were angels going up and down on that ladder. Remember?

So when Jacob wakes up, he realizes that this is no ordinary place. "***This place is none other than the house of God,***" he says, "and the gateway of heaven." So Jacob names it "Bethel," which means "House of God."

Later on, Bethel became the place where many of the Judges, like Deborah and Samuel, guided Israel before the time of any king or kingdom.

So you can imagine hundreds of years later, that when the northern kingdom needed to set up their own version of Jerusalem, their own holy city, Bethel just made sense. It was the obvious choice. After all, if you're going to plant a church you might as well put it where God has been known to show up, right?

So they set up a national cathedral in Bethel. Bethel was the place where the King of Israel went to church. It's the ***Westminster Abby*** of the northern kingdom. Which meant for Israel in the north, Bethel was ***the*** religious place to go.

And from all appearance,s it was doing well. Attendance was up. Tithes were strong. People were happy. Things were good at Bethel as far as the priest there, ***Amaziah***, was concerned.

And who wouldn't feel good to have the royal family in your congregation? Amaziah must have been the envy of all his peers. If there was going to be a PBS special on religion in their day, chances are, they're going to want to interview the current priest in Bethel.

It was the place to be. So there was always a steady flow of pilgrims in and out, coming to worship, to make sacrifices, to celebrate festivals. It was a busy place, buzzing with religious activity and holy moments.

And in the middle of all the hustle and bustle of all this religious life, Amos shows up. He watches as people come and go, as they celebrate, and worship, and make their offerings.

But something doesn't set right with Amos. Because as impressive as all of their worship is... They're no different on their way out than they were on the way in. ***They are still living by the very same stories.***

Rather than their worship forming God's story into their hearts,
their worship is simply comforting, and placating, and maintaining the status quo. Which means... Their worship is a mockery to God.

So Amos decides it's time for him to write his own liturgy. He's put together a special worship service to catch everyone's attention, and it does. It starts off pretty shocking.

Imagine opening up to the call to worship. You expect something like Psalm 95:

**O come, let us worship and bow down,
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture.**

It's the kind of thing you've read a hundred times before. But on this particular day, you get this call to worship, join me:

*O come let us go to Bethel, to the house of the Lord,
To rebel against our God.*

*Enter this place of worship,
That you might sin all the more (Amos 4:4).*

What?

You didn't even notice it until you're already reading it aloud with everyone else. And you know this can't be right. I mean, surely this is a typo here. And how embarrassing... especially for Amaziah, the priest.

Next thing you know the acolytes come in, but they get it wrong, too. Instead of lighting the candles, they knock them over.

Instead of opening the scriptures, they carry them out... and you're not sure if that's supposed to have some kind of meaning or not.

Then you stand to sing the opening hymn. And you know the melody, but there are new words printed up on the screen. You're not sure where they came from, but they sure are strange.

(To the tune of "Holy, Holy, Holy")
**God hates and despises all of our worship.
All of our gatherings and songs do not appeal (5:21-23).
You can seek out Bethel or Gilgal all year
And still turn justice, into rotting wood (5:5-7).**

It's about the strangest song you've ever heard. In fact, half the congregation leaves during that hymn.

But on the off chance that you're still there, or not quite offended enough by Amos' antics, Amos gets up to offer the call to stewardship. Just before the offering is collected he says:

“As we pass the plates this morning, please announce how much your offering will be. Make sure you speak up loud enough for everyone to hear, because the Lord knows how much you like to be noticed. So go ahead and make your spectacle, says the Lord” (4:5). The sarcasm isn't lost on you and you're pretty offended, like everyone else.

Amaziah the priest finally grabs Amos by the arm, takes him outside and chews him out. (7:12-13) “Go back where you came from and prophesy there,” he tells Amos. “You and your words aren't welcome here. In fact, don't ever come to Bethel again. This is the King's sanctuary, and the temple of his kingdom.”

And there it is.

From Amaziah's own mouth. “This is the King's sanctuary,” not God's sanctuary. “And the temple of the King's kingdom!” not the Kingdom of God.

If that's the case, then it's no wonder the place of worship has become so offensive to God. It's full of sacred rituals and religious words, but at the heart of the place, their deepest story, is King Jeroboam and his rule.

At the heart of this place is national pride and their economic security.

At the heart of that place, and those who worship there, is their own private little kingdom, rather than the kingdom of God.

And most of them don't even realize it.

They don't see the disconnect. ***Because it's just so hard to see...*** These stories are in the air we breathe. They are living themselves into us and out of us.

But when it comes down to it, the story of the northern kingdom, and Jeroboam's rule, is the primary story that is living itself in Israel in those days.

The story of success, power, and the pursuit of pleasure is rooted so much deeper in them than the story of God.

And thousands of years later, the people of God are still wrestling with the same reality. Most of the time the story of the gospel is not the deepest story we're living. It's not the first lens we have for interpreting our world.

And this plays itself out in all kinds of ways, but one of the most striking to me is that... ***if we are really honest with ourselves,***

most of us read the news of our day,
through the lenses of our political identity,
and our political persuasion
before we read it through the lens of the gospel.

And so, we read about another mass shooting, this time in a church, and I could guess more about your thinking about that, by knowing what political party you identify with, than whether or not you go to church. Not because some of us are good and some are bad, but because one of these stories is shaping your worldview more than the other.

Or, if you and I were talking about the tax plan being considered in Congress, it would be easier for any of us to guess one another's thoughts on the matter by knowing whether you listen to MSNBC or to FOX news rather than by whether or not you attend worship on Sunday mornings or hang out at a coffee shop on Sunday mornings. What news station you're listening to is influencing you more.

Do you see why the Church has a problem?

Even for us, the Kingdom of God is *rarely* our primary story, our primary lens. Sure it's there, but it is the forth or fifth lens. It's the fourth or fifth layer of our interpretation of the events in our life. It comes after the interpretation of our emotions, and after the interpretation of our racial identity, and after our national identity, and after that of our political party, and after the commentary we hear from our favorite news stations.

Each of those have different stories... and those stories are like layers of glasses worn simultaneously. The events of our world often pass through all these different lenses before they even get to the lens of our faith.

As a result, our vision of the Kingdom of God is often reframed through these stories rather than those lenses and stories being reframed by the Kingdom of God.

It's why the religious right is hardly distinguishable from the Republican Party. And the religious left is hardly distinguishable from the Democratic Party.

Our deepest story isn't the story of the Kingdom of God.

By the way, it's another version of the same trap that Martha is falling into in our reading from Luke this morning.

Martha has opened her home to Jesus and welcomed him in. You might say Martha's walked the aisle and invited Jesus into her life. But there is a lot to do to make this a successful visit. And so, there are all kinds of stories working on her...

stories about being a good host,

stories about a woman's role vs. a man's role (her sister Mary was acting like a male disciple.).

There are all kinds of stories feeding Martha's frustration... and she loses it.

"Jesus, tell my sister to get up and help me!"

"Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things," Jesus says, "but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it won't be taken from her."

"You are distracted by many things," he says.

"There are so many stories that are driving you and controlling you... and you don't even see it. But only one thing is needed," Jesus says.

"One thing.

One story.

My story"

Mary is at the feet of Jesus, soaking up that one story.
Mary has hit pause on all the other stories... to try to listen deeper.
To try to set aside all the other stories she's been living,
and to be formed by a different story.

Dayspring, this is why spiritual formation is essential to our life together. And it's why spiritual formation is essential if we want to make a gospel impact on our world.

And it's why the doctorate that you're enabling me to work on is concentrated on spiritual formation.

At its core, spiritual formation is about becoming a people who live from a different story.
And that means we have to do more than "know" the story.
It means we have to become the story.

Because until we do, all those other stories will always come first...
and Amos is going to keep showing up, shouting in our ears.
And you and I? We're going to keep running around like Martha, frustrated and disappointed with one another.

So beloved, let me invite you to simply begin to recognize all the stories that are driving you...
and notice the ways they are not the story that Jesus tells.

Set those other stories aside.
And soak up the presence of Christ.
Set those other stories aside,
stop listening to them for awhile.
and allow God's one deeper story of the Kingdom of God,
to work its way into you,
and live its way out through you.

Amen.

Reflection: vs. 1 of "Be Thou My Vision"

*Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art—
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.*