Beyond the Big Stick

Amos 5:21-24

I hate, I despise your festivals . . . your solemn assemblies . . . I will not accept the offerings you bring . . . take away from me the noise of your songs . . .

Ahh . . . that feels good, doesn't it? Well, for a moment, at least. When the frustration builds up . . . when the patience runs out . . . when you've just got to say it how it is and let go with both barrels in righteous indignation.

I wonder if Amos felt good delivering that message to the people of Israel? Tough words. No pulled punches here. This is God talking to his chosen people . . . the people he rescued from slavery in Egypt . . . the people he made a covenant with . . . the people he loves . . . but, they just didn't seem to get it! Time and again they walk away from God's way . . . they are tempted by life's pleasures, or by other gods . . . and time and again God sends his prophets to whack them with the big stick.

Not . . . happy . . . Jan!

You come to worship, but then don't look after the orphans and widows . . . you give me praise, but go home and rip off your neighbour . . . if you were truly sincere about being my people you would show it by your actions . . . by your justice . . . by your righteousness . . . that's what I want from my people . . . justice and righteousness . . . that's what I demand if you want to be in a relationship with me!

You might think that's not a bad message for the people of Israel . . . you might think that's not a bad message for God's people today! You might think we need more of that sort of message . . . we've all gone a bit soft. Stir 'em up a bit . . . get 'em out of their comfort zones! Tell 'em a few home truths. Sometime a hard word has to be spoken, doesn't it? Yes, it does . . . sometimes a hard word has to be spoken . . . even by God . . . even by a preacher. But, I tell you . . . every time I've preached that sort of sermon . . . no matter what congregation it's been in . . . as I'm greeting people at the door afterwards someone invariably says to me: "Great sermon pastor . . . they really needed to hear that"!

'They really needed to hear that' . . . we're experts at deflecting responsibility . . . it's always been that way . . . and, even if we were to take notice . . . even if we would take that hard word to heart, the big stick might even change our behaviour for a while, but soon enough we're back to our old deflecting habits, because the big stick can't change our hearts . . . and, the big stick can never make us good enough for God.

And, yet, so many of the words we hear . . . from others . . . from ourselves . . . are big stick words: you haven't done enough . . . you haven't measured up . . . you can do better. Isn't that our world . . . we can't escape the big stick. I experience it in my work . . . in the expectations of myself and of others: Have I visited enough? . . . cared enough . . . spent enough time with that person . . . with that family . . . with my own family . . . have I planned enough . . . did I miss that opportunity to talk about my faith . . . should I be doing more . . . do I need to manage my time better?

What about you . . . do you feel that big stick? At work . . . you have to get it right . . . make the right decision . . . do it more efficiently . . . be more productive . . . do it better . . . prove your worth.

Maybe at home . . . where you never seem to say the right thing . . . you're always treading on eggshells . . . you feel out of place . . . if only you had more time . . . you just can't seem to get relationships right.

Perhaps at church . . . we need you on this roster . . . why didn't you turn up for the meeting? . . . you need to do more . . . tell more people about your faith . . . be more involved in the community . . . we don't do it that way here . . . are you really treating people justly . . . how righteous are you really?

We're no strangers to the big stick. We live with it everyday . . . and it doesn't work. It didn't work for the people of Israel . . . the prophets kept hitting them and they would come back to God for a while, but then wander away again . . . and it doesn't work for us . . . either it falls on deaf ears . . . or it burdens us and drags us down.

Justice and righteous . . . true, that's what God desires, but *my* righteousness will never be enough . . . my worship may not always be sincere enough for God . . . I may not always put the effort in that I should to maintain a relationship with God . . . and, I will never be the perfect pastor.

But, thankfully, the big stick is not God's final word . . . there is another way. God has taken that big stick the prophets used . . . he's taken that stick . . . and made it into a cross . . . and, in the person of his Son, Jesus, God put himself on that cross . . . and took the beating . . . the mocking . . . the big stick words of condemnation and failure . . . he took it all the way to the grave. Jesus took the blows of the big stick for you and for me.

So, as I come into God's presence today in worship . . . I come with all my failings . . . with my insecurities . . . and I come to a place of grace . . . to be <u>given</u> a place of grace . . . where it's not about what I think of myself . . . it's not about what <u>you</u> say about me, or what expectations I have, or haven't, met . . . what matters as we come to this place is that Jesus covers me . . . and you . . . with <u>his</u> righteousness . . . just as I am . . . just as you are. Jesus covers us with his righteousness . . . that's what matters.

In our text, God said: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" . . . I know now . . . not <u>my</u> justice . . . not <u>my</u> righteousness . . . but, Jesus' justice . . . Jesus' righteousness . . . poured out on me . . . on you . . . that's why we come to worship . . . to stand under that waterfall of grace . . . grace that we don't deserve . . . but grace that flows over us as we hear the words of forgiveness in the absolution (I speak them for me too!) . . . as we take the body and blood of Jesus in our hands and on our lips . . . God's grace given for you . . . shed for you . . . as we go with the blessing of God's face turned toward us.

That's why we come . . . week after week . . . even though our offerings are often unacceptable . . . our efforts are often weak . . . our thoughts far from pure . . . we come to stand under that ever-flowing stream of grace . . . to be showered by it . . . to be cleansed by it . . . to be changed by it.

Changed enough that as we go from here some of that stream might just keep flowing . . . maybe it's just a trickle, but a trickle is enough . . . enough to go around . . . enough to see the needs of the lonely . . . the sick . . . the hurting. We won't always get it right . . . and we can

never do enough . . . but, God's grace just keeps on flowing . . . and, as we receive it, so can we give it . . . so can we share it . . . so can we live it.

Amen.

Pastor John Strelan
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley
Pentecost 24, 2026