

TILL WE REACH THAT DAY

November 12, 2017 by Pilar Millhollen

Readings: *The Prophets* (Abraham Joshua Heschel); Amos 5:18-24

Has anyone seen the twitter account from God? With the handle @TheGoodGodAbove, this page unfurled a slew of comments since last Sunday's act of domestic terror at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, TX. The second mass shooting to occur in the span of two months after the tragedy in Las Vegas, this one took the lives of 26 parishioners as young as 17 months and as old as 77 years. Well, on Twitter God had some pretty clear instructions for America in the wake of this tragedy. Some highlights include: "Lean on God's understanding: Until you take action and do something, these mass shootings will only get worse." "Hey politicians and NRA lobbyists, Why are you like this?" and one that has gone viral on social media and takes a cue from our ancient prophets, "REMINDER (*in capital letters*): I don't accept thoughts and prayers anymore, those are banned. Pry your hands apart and actually do something if you want to prevent future mass shootings. Like a nationwide gun buyback program. It's really not that hard."

If you are outraged, you are not alone. If you are grieving, you are not alone. If you are terrified, you are not alone. If you feel hopeless, you are not alone. Our sacred text this morning from Amos, a shepherd from the small Judean town of Tekoa, speaks to us now in the midst of our grief, though its darkness was wildly unpopular in its own time. Amos, a self-proclaimed "unprofessional prophet," was working as a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees when he heard the voice of God and was compelled to travel north to the kingdom of Israel to proclaim a message that was not so positive. At the time, Israel was relatively prosperous and under King Jeroboam II had effectively managed to stave off invasion by paying tribute to the powerful Assyrian Empire, a Mesopotamian kingdom in what is now Iraq that spent a great deal of time terrorizing and occupying neighboring nations. Samaria, where King Jeroboam resided, stood out with its opulent palaces and impressive buildings. But Israel's prosperity came at a high internal cost – through a manipulated system of credit and debt wealthy landowners were becoming richer by enslaving the small farmers who worked the land. While the cities outwardly appeared abundant, Amos could not turn his eyes from the underbelly, what he saw as a repudiation of God's laws: an obsession with luxury, a trampling of the poor, a reckless endangerment of the vulnerable. And this was not all; Amos' prophetic message begins not for Israel only, but also for the nations surrounding Israel. Their crimes? Senseless violence. In a departure from traditional Hebrew prophecy, Amos predicts God's wrath poured out upon the neighboring nations from Syria to Gaza to Tyre for the terror that they have wreaked upon each other – war crimes that neighbor has inflicted upon neighbor. The terror that swept the nations in this tiny portion of land in the ancient near east grieved the God of Israel in a display of great compassion for all of God's people, all humanity as they had succumbed to their basest instincts – a tribalism that inspired fear of the other and its brutal result: the desire to conquer, to subdue, to eradicate that other in order to feel some sense of power themselves. God watched in despair as neighbor turned upon neighbor; and while Israel remained intact and relatively stable, the constant threat of violence lay in every corner of the land. King Jeroboam's tribute to an incredibly violent empire proved a high price for stability, as it undermined the ways of enacting God's justice and set a tone for Israel's compromised ethics. It was no coincidence that Israel picked up where Assyria left off; in a sense, it was as if they were being held hostage by one group – a minority whose fearful ethos of defense and conquest terrorized the nations surrounding them. This feels all too relevant in the context of our own prophetic grief.

In our chapter this morning, Amos laments the fall of Israel for its transgressions in an eerie depiction of what happens when violence is countered by violence. “The city that marched out a thousand shall have a hundred left, and that which marched out a hundred shall have ten left.” Amos describes God in mourning, asking the people to do what God has required of them in order to be with them: “Seek good and not evil so that *you may live*,” he pleads in verse 14, “and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.” Amos does not mince words, he cuts right to the very heart of the matter: life and death. Seeking good equals life; seeking evil means they cannot survive. He doesn’t stop here – note that God’s fellowship with the people is contingent not on worship, but upon the just deeds of the people. “Hate the evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate,” he proclaims in the following verse. “It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” Here, establishing justice in the gate is the requirement for God to shed grace upon the people, the “remnant of Joseph.” On what would have been “the Day of the Lord,” an eschatological day of judgment where God returns to permanently reside with the people and rule upon earth, Amos prophesies that Israel’s festivities would turn to lamentations. How powerful, how familiar his words feel at this time, when we who desire justice, we who crave peace feel helpless at the hands of a powerful few who believe that violence will subdue violence; how his cries echo in our ears as we approach this season for giving thanks, for celebration of all that we have, and yet we still feel (as the prophet writes), as if we have fled from a lion and are met by a bear...that here in a nation where we have more weapons than people, where mass shootings are so frequent that we can literally count one per day, how can we not be left with the fear of walking into the house and resting a hand against the wall only to be bitten by a snake?

If our grief is prophetic, we who crave the realm of God on earth know that joy comes in the morning. But in this scenario, in this time where as our prophetic sister Fannie Lou Hamer says, we are sick and tired of being sick and tired - we must not bypass the grief and all that comes with it. In this scenario, I would shift our gaze from anticipation of joy that comes in the morning to open ourselves to the perspective of joy that comes in the mourning. Can we sit with God in our mourning? The God that speaks through Amos directly in our final verses of the text, who laments, “I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies”? The God who in divine despondency cannot even *look* upon offerings, whose sorrow can no longer bear to hear music? In this anguish, God responds to reckless injustice right there with us in our response – the pain is so great that even the Divine One does not want to be worshipped, but chooses, pleads, commands instead that His people “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” This is no transcendent God but one that is so deeply afflicted by the havoc that we wreak upon each other - who has such concern for the innocent – and the guilty – that this God puts Herself right in our midst.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who wrote a 600-page dissertation on the Hebrew prophetic tradition, was a Polish Jew from a long line of Hasidic leaders who narrowly escaped the concentration camps during the Third Reich to become one of the greatest teachers of American 20th-century Judaism. His work during the Civil Right Movement with Martin Luther King, Jr. marked a historic sea change in American Jewish and Christian relations and a renewed interest in religious social justice. His theology was informed both by the horrors of fascism and the Holocaust, and his childhood, where he was surrounded by Hasidic mystics. He spoke of them as people of “great compassion and understanding for other people.” His was a tradition of rigorous piety – a righteousness expressed in humanity’s relationship to itself honoring the Jewish belief that each human being is made in the image of God. He died rather young in 1972 at the age of 65.

According to his daughter Susannah, who also became a professor of Jewish studies, the injustice of the war in Vietnam essentially ended his life. Being one of the bloodiest and most senseless battles in modern history, Heschel's anguish over the war was so great, she recalled, that he became thin and drawn; she often heard him spend sleepless nights pacing the hallway of their Manhattan apartment. Heschel writes that for the prophet, even the slightest injustice is a calamity, because it's a kind of isolation from God. With prophetic faith as his anchor, he taught that for any person, religion without indignation at the slightest violence of neighbor against neighbor was impossible. "To speak about God and remain silent on Vietnam is blasphemous," he said.

To speak about God and remain silent on gun violence in this country is blasphemous. To speak about God and to support civilian militarism is blasphemous. And to speak about God by offering "thoughts and prayers" without changing legislation around the proliferation of 300 million guns in our nation is most certainly blasphemous. This past week, in my own grief, I had my own sick and tired of being sick and tired. I shed a lot of tears. Left without words, I asked the same question that the Twitter God asked of our legislators, "*Why are you like this?*" And I also realized that in my grief, in my anger, in all of it, that the majority of fellow Americans are feeling the same thing right there with me. And that's where I feel God. That's the prophetic voice that says that this violence will not endure. Because ultimately we won't let it. We are a work in progress, and sometimes we move backward before we can move forward. It is easy to get caught up in where we're moving backward while forgetting that only a few years ago, gay marriage was illegal. That 50 years ago, we were legally segregated. That 100 years ago, women couldn't vote. We must remember that for every J.P. Morgan there is an Emma Goldman; for every George Wallace there is a John Lewis; for every Phyllis Schlafly there is a Gloria Steinem. Even in the frightening prophecy of Amos, the cries of an anguished God, he doesn't end with doom. That's the thing about the prophetic tradition; that's why 2500 years later we lean upon the words of our prophets because they challenge, they scold, they grieve, they call out the state of the world for exactly what it is; but their ultimate purpose is to remind us that the end of the story is love. The end of the story is always restoration; the end of the story is that we remember who we are because we are the children of divine compassion. "Let justice roll down like waters," the prophet cries, for then in the morning - in the *mourning* - "The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them." This week, despite the stronghold of a moneyed minority over our legislators, a small step forward was taken to change gun legislation in the Senate. It is to be sure, a tentative move, but it's a move toward change that we have had yet to see. It is an unexpected bud of hope in a small action that will eventually move toward where our collective souls are pulled - a just society where our hearts are happy, as the song goes, and our souls are free. We must take heart knowing that the majority of the country wants more peace, less weapons, and we will not be silenced. Even God on Twitter, after the litany of woes, thoughtfully wrote: "I understand the battle is hard, but the first step, the most important step, is that YOU never lose hope. I hope you choose love over hate. I hope you choose good over evil. I hope."

As we sang, Let the new day dawn, oh lord, I pray: we'll never get to heaven till we reach that day.

