

# **An Ever-Flowing Stream by Rev. Katheryn McGinnis**

## **November 8, 2020**

An ever-flowing stream. That imagery has stuck with me in my mind recently. The dramatic image of a grand waterfall like Niagara or Victoria falls. Or like a mountain stream – trickling down from the mountain tops slowly at first but turning into a mighty river.

It's not surprising that Amos uses imagery of water to describe the presence of justice and righteousness. Water is life. We need it, the planet needs it, every living thing needs it. But it also brings death and destruction: too much water causes flash floods, tsunamis, drowning. Too little causes droughts, dehydration, fires. Our lives live within the balance of water.

Water is all consuming. I lived in the Philippines for a year after college. And I doubt I'll ever forget that feeling when I first arrived, and I stepped out of the airport. Instantly, I felt as through a blanket of water wrapped around me. The humidity was unlike anything I had experienced.

Moving to Santa Cruz in 2020, water has taken on a new impression. The lack of water is palpable, again in a way I have never experienced before. The air is dry and there are no rains. A shock for an east-coaster.

And just like that shock, this passage is a striking one. The language is strong and frankly, quite uncomfortable. Amos is angry.

The book of Amos dates to the late 700s BCE. Amos is from the southern kingdom of Judah – he was a “herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (7.14) who was called to prophesy to the northern Kingdom of Israel. History tells us that the time Amos was prophesying, there was peace. A peace that “seems to have been accompanied by prosperity, at least for a few and – according to Amos – at the expense of many. There seems to have been a breakdown in the old tribal and family systems of land ownership and the emergence of a wealthy class at the top of the society.” And Amos is angry.

As our passage for today tells us – Amos is angry that the people have only focused on one aspect of their faith: their laws and rituals and worship, but they have forgotten that God is always the God of the least of these, the poor, the oppressed, and by ignoring them – their worship and rituals and laws mean nothing to God. There is a deep connection in ancient Israel between liturgy and justice that they have forgotten or perhaps ignored.

Chapter 5, verse 18 opens with Alas, which frequently begins laments for the dead. Is Amos here suggesting that his audience is already dead?

In her commentary of Amos, Margaret Odell argues that what's killing the people is Israel is their desire. She argues that this passage revolves around the theme of the Lord's coming. The people expect salvation. Amos "must demolish false expectations so that his audience can recognize the gifts God has already given them and thereby come to participate more fully in the means of their salvation."

What's killing them is their desire. Their desire for salvation. And they get darkness.

My life is filled with desire right now. I suspect yours is too. I must tell you that I'm recording this video on Thursday, and I don't know the fate of the election. Perhaps by the time you see this, we will know, but perhaps not. But nevertheless, I am filled with desire. A desire for salvation through an election. If only my candidate could win, then this darkness will become light.

Our whole country is on pins and needles. Furiously reloading our internet browser again and again hoping to get results. There are calls for peace whatever the results, protests have already broken out. Yes, indeed, "is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?" (5.20)

But in this dark day, Amos is outraged by the irony of it all. As Carolyn Sharp write, "The prophet shows the cherished traditions of Israel to be not causes for complacency but measures of Israel's accountability to God." Their worship alone will not save them: God will hold them accountable for forgetting righteousness and justice.

How will God hold us accountable in our desires of today? Do we see the relationship between liturgy and justice? Between worship and righteousness? That what we do outside the church is deeply connected to worship inside the church?

The word justice used here is defined as "the establishment of the right, and of the person in the right, through fair legal procedures, in accordance with the will of the Lord." Righteousness is defined as "that quality of life in relationship with others in the community that gives rise to justice." The two are deeply intertwined: with each other through relationship and community and with God through the law. The justice and righteousness God demand must be reflected within the law.

Yes, it makes sense that justice and righteousness must roll down like waters. Just as water is all consuming – connected to everything we do in life – life is dependent on the balance of water - so is the justice and righteousness that God demands. We cannot have salvation without justice and righteousness for the least of these, just as we cannot have life without water.

In describing this justice, Amos uses the word "waters" found in Genesis 1, in the creation of the world. "To describe an overwhelming and unimaginable justice, Amos chooses an equally unimaginable image. He calls for justice, which surges like the primordial water of creation in genesis 1 – the waters that supported the very foundations of the earth; the waters that were present even before God began to

create, the water that were so powerful that God would use the firmament of the sky to hold them back.”

The waters that have been and always will be – God uses them to spread justice and righteousness. They are ever flowing and all consuming – and our fate hangs within their balance.

But as we sit and wait and update the internet browser every ten minutes and desire consumes – Amos shows us the irony of it all – we have the tools for our salvation right at our fingertips.

Justice and righteousness for the poor, the marginalized, they are not far away concepts we can only dream about, they are realities we work toward, and hold are ourselves accountable with.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used this passage often in speeches during the Civil rights movement. He used it as a call for what could be, the beloved community. It still can be. In the drama and fear and anger of this passage, I find hope in this time, in this present. For God to hold me accountable, and the world accountable – it means God still has faith in what we could be, it what we were created to be.

Whether these waters of justice and righteousness are here to punish us or help us: it need not matter. Let them roll, let the ever-flowing stream consume our world and remind us of its potential. Of the world this is meant to be.

On my favorite hike back in North Carolina, there is a mountain stream. As you climb the mountain the river turns into a creek which turns into a stream. And the stream gets smaller and smaller but when you reach the top of the mountain, the water in the stream is at a high enough elevation where it's safe to drink right from the stream. And it's the best water I've ever drank. Cold and crisp and pure. Perhaps that is what God's justice and righteousness is like. It starts out small but bure and powerful. It grows bigger and more diluted as it encounters the reality of our world – but it still brings life. The pure water is still there, we need only work a little more to find it.

An ever-flowing stream. A stream that will not stop today or tomorrow. A stream that has been and always will be: that is the justice and righteousness God. Thanks be to God. Amen.