

“Hear this, O you who swallow up the needy, ravaging the poor of the land — Saying, We must swiftly reduce the wages that we pay and break the power of the people, so that we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yes, and sell them only chaff to eat — not the nourishing grain and bread.

“Yet “ — he clamored – “ if the wealthy and the powerful cut off the life of the poor, then the Breath of Life will cut off the prosperity of the land – yes, of the Earth itself! — will make the land tremble, and every one who lives there mourn. Disaster shall rise up as a flood; and their cities shall be cast out and drowned.” Amos 2:6.

Many of you may have had this experience. When I was young, I did not appreciate lima beans. I did not want to eat them. They sat on my plate long after the meatloaf and potato had met their ends. And my mother would say, ‘eat up all your food because children are starving in India’. And I would say, ‘They can have my lima beans’. Sound familiar? It was always India. I didn’t know why it was always India but it was and I wondered how eating my lima beans would keep those children from starvation. I should find out if people still say those things to their children and if they do, which country do they use? Haiti? South Sudan?

I saw India, always, as a country in which everyone starved. Not only that, I saw it as a country where everyone had always starved and always would starve. It was what made India, India. So it was with great surprise that I found that Indians had not always starved, that many rural Indians had been self-sufficient, not wealthy, but able to grow their own food and have a thatched roof over their heads.

Two events ended that. One was the British domination of India and the other was a series of weather events so severe that they reduced what had been a fertile farming area to a lifeless desert. The two events combined to destroy much of India.

In his book *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Mike Davis makes the connection between these two catastrophes. In addition, he documents the way in which the severe El Nino events that occurred in waves from the 1870's to the early 1900 also affected, among other places, Indonesia, Brazil and China. Like India, each area was affected by weather that alternately sent drought or floods, drought which dried the land and floods which eroded the dried soil. The result was millions upon millions of people dead and economies that never really recovered.

Now, I don't know what you think about climate change. Do you feel that the climate change is the result of natural cyclical changes? You might be right. Or do you believe that it is the result of human activity? You might be right as well. What seems to be clear is that there are natural changes in the climate and those changes have a lot to do with variations in the winds and currents and not much that humans do at all. On the other hand, there is also unmistakable evidence that human activity has intensified and accelerated the natural variations, make their

effects much more severe. So, everybody's a little right and a little wrong. I love it when that happens.

In the mid to late 1800's, there was both a natural event, back to back El Ninos, at the same time that humans had been increasingly altering the environment through more factories and railroads and other activities that used coal extensively. The extreme ferocity of successive El Nino events certainly precipitated the droughts and floods that devastated much of the southern hemisphere. But the human response was what shoved a bad situation into apocalypse.

At this point the British ruled India through a complicated system of local rulers and direct rule. Villages of self-sufficient farmers had been either encouraged or forced into farming cotton, which is notorious for quickly using up the fertility of the land. When the droughts came, the land was turned into a desert and most of the topsoil was lost. Export of cotton, exclusively to the British mills, meant that farmers often got very little for their product. When drought came, it was the British who set up or did not set up, and mostly did not set up, any relief. For the British governors in India their concerns were not that many people were dying but that any efforts to assist the people in the stricken areas must guarantee that free trade was protected and that relief efforts did not encourage dependency in the

people. Their view of Indians was that they were lazy and ignorant and therefore they insisted that people who were desperate for food for their families must earn it by being required to go to work camps far from their homes. Therefore, starving people had to walk miles and miles for badly paid jobs requiring hard manual labor. The route between the starvation villages and the camps set up near the job sites were littered with dead bodies. Many more died in the camps. Mostly, this went on without the British government doing any investigation of the areas affected by the draught. Some missionaries and some members of Parliament, especially those few Indian representatives who had recently been allowed to be elected, brought the dire situation to the attention of Parliament where they were ignored. Over and over, the concern of the government was that too much was being done for India, not that the very people whose labor was essential to British prosperity were dying in mass numbers. When successive governors of India did go to the most affected provinces, they were so blinded by their own version of events that they were not able to understand what they saw around them. From their railway carriages they said they saw a prosperous region, while photographs show walking skeletons and reports of journalists and missionaries testify to the horrors of murder, madness and cannibalism.

Roughly the same situation was true in all the other countries affected by the fierce El Nino weather. The British Empire dominated the globe and so affected all

areas of the southern hemisphere through trade, often forced trade as in China, or through banking practices, as in Brazil. The British and the native aristocracies combined to ignore or mismanage the devastating events of the droughts and floods, many of which were made worse by the change from small, self-sufficient farms to crop farming which devastated the environment.

In turn, in all these places, the starving people further degraded the environment by stripping away anything that could be eaten. Any vegetation was stripped away which of course made the effects of drought and floods far worse. It was these events that were responsible for making what we now call the third world. The destroyed environment, the broken people, were all ripe for exploitation by the wealthy nations. With the collaboration of their own elites, the common people became poorer and more dependent on world markets that they could not control.

The India that I imagined in my childhood of starving, hopeless people need not have existed. Like all situations, it was the product of both natural events and human response to those natural events. As in our own personal lives, things happen to us and we have varying amounts of resources with which to respond to those events. We always have some choices but some people have more choices than others. The way we structure our families, our communities, our nation, determines to a great extent who will thrive and who will fail. We have often been

taught, from childhood, to see poor people in the third world as simply backward and ignorant, in need of our charity at best. We have been taught to see poor people in our own country as victims of their own incompetence or moral failings, so it is hard for us to see the forces that create poverty and limit choices. We see who suffers from poverty but not always those who benefit from poverty. Just as people in Victorian Britain, we are taught a certain way to see events around us. And so holocausts somewhere far away are invisible just as the suffering of the poor next door are also invisible. We can't see what we have no framework for seeing.

I have three reasons for talking about events far away and long ago. The first is that I was appalled to find I had never heard of these great catastrophes which altered the world and killed millions. We often say of the Jewish Holocaust 'never again' and yet holocausts occurred both before and after the 1930's and 40's. People can't remember what they don't know. And people have difficulty seeing the similarities between events that happen to people in different places in different times. But genocide is genocide. Mass murder is mass murder, no matter how it occurs. When we say 'never again' we pledge ourselves to vigilance and to seeing beyond the surface, beyond the headlines.

The second reason I have for talking of earlier holocausts is because it is necessary to understand that we respond more quickly and more whole heartedly to people who look like us and whose culture seems more like ours. That is why the myth of the lazy, ignorant, backward third world is so harmful. We are not encouraged to ask why people might be this way, why cultures might have evolved in different directions. We simply accept that they are like this and so unable to care for themselves. It is a short step from here to assume that all efforts to help are in vain. We also respond with more of a sense of urgency when the elimination of millions of people is presented as a deliberate policy rather than a catastrophe that is the result of natural forces. However, even that is difficult. When many people knew about the Nazi regime's genocidal policies, many were unable or unwilling to believe that it could be happening. Help came late and often accidentally. People excused violence, turned a blind eye, rationalized it. This is even more true when the lives of people are threatened not by a stated, deliberate policy but by neglect and indifference. We, like the British, are often unable to see what is happening all around us, at this moment. We have trouble seeing the slow holocausts of unchecked poverty. We are often unable to get beyond the manipulation of the media, the myths we have been taught, to find both effective and compassionate ways to respond to tragedy, even to see it as tragedy. When disaster strikes, whether it's personal disaster such as illness or job loss, or whether it's those

disasters we call natural, hurricanes, earthquakes, drought, fires, whatever the need, can we see it as our disaster, too, no matter where we live, no matter who we are? Can we see that a compassionate response, in the long run, is what benefits everyone, including ourselves?

And this brings me to the third reason I have for talking about this. The title of this sermon is 'The Price of Shoes'. This refers to what the prophet Amos said thousands of years ago. He was not the only prophet to say this sort of thing, but he was extremely eloquent. He warned us of the price we ultimately pay if we 'buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes;'

What is the price of a pair of shoes these days? I looked them up on the internet and designer shoes seem to range somewhere between \$700 up to around \$1700. By the way, I realized my peril in doing this in this electronic age and hope I'm not deluged with shoe offers now. So, somewhere between \$700 and \$1700. In today's market, I'm not sure how many poor people that would buy. At the low end, it would pay a month's rent. At the low end, it is a month's disability benefit. At the high end, it is, perhaps, a winter's propane. At the high end, it's a not so good car. At the low end, it's a little less than three weeks wages at minimum wage. That's one pair of shoes. People come cheap. This was what Amos was upset about.

I'd like to clarify one thing. Prophets were not considered people who could foretell the future. Their role was to be the mouthpiece of God, to speak what were God's intentions. We are not Bible based and most of us, I would guess, see prophets as men proclaiming their vision of what the world should be. But this is a powerful vision and, sad to say, one that still resonates in these times. In the late 1800's desolation was visited on vast swaths of the earth. The land did tremble and floods swept away both rich and poor. This was true partly because of natural disasters and partly because the land and the people on it had been already devastated by the actions of the wealthy who had, in unthinking and uncaring policies, already destroyed the base of healthy communities and healthy earth. We are still connected to those events. There are no walls between one minute and the next, no walls between one piece of land and another, to keep us safe from the same disasters.

Whether it is the vision of God or the vision of the good, what Amos says is that we violate this vision at our peril. The events of the late 1800's still rock our world. We can trace, in a direct line, much of world unrest from those days to this, much of our current conflicts, much of our worldwide violence, many of our fears and our sense of the precariousness of life. The vision of God or the vision of the

good, whatever force we honor, we are called to create an earth of wholeness and health for all who dwell upon it.