

Wandering from Sea to Sea

[Amos 8:1-12](#)

[Luke 3:7-9](#)

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Lynnewood United Methodist Church

How do you like the scripture readings today? Nice pictures, huh? Wailing instead of singing, corpses thrown about everywhere, the land trembling, and people mourning...There will be darkness; the feasts will be "sad affairs;" life will be like losing an only child, for heaven's sake, with hunger and thirst; and God will not even continue to speak words! People will wander from sea to sea, seeking God's word, but they will not find it. That was what the prophet Amos said. It was pretty bleak.

Then John the Baptist, another prophet, comes with his threats. "You children of snakes!" He says the ax is about to chop down the trees. If the trees bear no fruit, they'll be tossed into the fire! That's a threat! It doesn't look good...

And you might have thought the image of a fruit basket was a lovely picture. (It was another of Amos's visions. Last week the plumb line, this week the fruit basket.) But the fruit is rotting in this basket. The end is coming. The words of the prophets are harsh and critical.

Why? Because the people have not repented. They have been too busy celebrating their festivals and having a good time. They have been proud. And in their self-centered pride, they have ignored the needy. The text says they "trampled on the needy," but it's more subtle than that. We don't "trample on the needy" literally, we are just indifferent. It's indifference to evil, like I mentioned last week. Our focus is on ourselves, and so it doesn't occur to us that we are sinning.

Amos says, "Take away your noisy songs, and let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!"

The prophets speak oracles of doom, and yet, at the end of their ranting, there is still a glimmer of hope. The fruit is not completely rotten... (Rest assured, there are still figs on our tree!) We have time to change, and the prophets urge us to.

Is it possible to change? I guess we can be less prideful; we can try at least. If we talk less about how wonderful we are and more about what we could do to help others. I guess we can stop singing frivolous songs—, but John Wesley was the one who taught us to "sing lustily and with good courage!" But he did also say, "Sing modestly; strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound" (*UM Hymnal*, vii). I doubt the prophets had so much against singing, as they had against selfish living. We need to be in tune with one another, maybe that's the point. Often our sins are sins of omission, not sins of commission. It's that indifference to evil that seems to plague us.

The prophets were not warriors. They came with angry words, but not with swords. And their words were only angry because they were in defense of God's commandments. The people had forgotten that while 3 of the 10 Commandments deal with our relationship to God, 7 deal directly with our relationship to other people. In the eighth century before Christ, society had become stratified in Israel. The rich led very different lives from the poor, just as today. And Amos said that if the people didn't make an effort to listen to God, there would be no more words to hear. The people would "wander from sea to sea."

This phrase reminds me of all the people today who wander from sea to sea. There are more displaced people around the world today than ever before. Refugees are those people who had to leave their home countries due to war, conflict, or persecution. There are 21.3 million refugees today, over half of whom are children. Last fall we watched boat loads of refugees arrive off the shore of the Greek islands. There was a flood of Syrians and people of countries from all over the Middle East, desperately leaving everything to live somewhere in safety. It tore our hearts. The Europeans responded and opened the floodgates. But the flood kept coming, and one by one the countries closed their borders. Now people are coming across the wide part of the Mediterranean from Africa to Europe.

More than half of all refugees come from Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia. And the countries now hosting the most refugees are Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, and Jordan. This is a huge global problem. Many do not think the American people are doing enough by accepting 85,000 this year.

Our church initiated the idea of assisting a refugee family. We contacted Catholic Charities, one of three U. S. refugee resettlement agencies in the East Bay that works with churches. We hesitated to go this alone, and so we invited our four other circuit churches to join our task force. We raised \$10,000 and applied to Catholic Charities to receive a family on or after May 1st. On May 9th our family arrived in San Francisco. They are a family of three: the mother Abeer (35) and two sons, Ali (12) and Naji (9) from Yemen. This family had spent the last two years in Turkey. They speak Arabic and some English, and the boys speak Turkish from having attended school in Turkey. It appears that Abeer asked to come to the San Francisco area because a friend of a relative lives in San Bruno. This friend, a man named Diya, met the family at the airport and found them an apartment in Daly City. Our funds helped the family get started, and people from our church provided furniture, kitchen utensils, and linens. Abeer is very grateful.

It has been two months now. She has applied for and been granted social services, which she is entitled to as a refugee. But she is not happy in Daly City. She feels isolated and trapped there. She wants to go to Los Angeles and become a make-up artist. Our committee and Catholic Charities advise against this move because Abeer knows no one in L.A., and she would no longer get the benefits of a newly arrived refugee, once she makes a secondary migration within this country. We met with her on Tuesday and laid out her options. We hope she will move to the East Bay, where we will be closer to her to help with a job hunt and registration of her boys to begin school. If you know of an apartment or shared living situation for \$1400 per month or less that would accommodate 3 people, please let me know. If you know of a job that Abeer might start, also please let me know.

She has a high school education; she is gracious and very lovely. She speaks enough English to manage, and she appears to be a quick learner. Her boys are bright and eager to meet friends.

I am very pleased that Lynnewood has offered to help a refugee family. We are finding that it is not easy. Cultural differences in communication have made our start a bit rocky. We have learned that the orientation for refugees coming from Turkey is inadequate, and families do not understand what to expect when they come. Even though this is a country of vast opportunity, many people in the United States struggle below the poverty line, and the cost of living (especially rent) in the Bay Area is out of reach even for many Americans. For that reason, Catholic Charities only accepts refugees to the East Bay who have family contacts here. We are hoping to help Abeer get off to a new start: get an apartment in Alameda or Contra Costa Counties, get her boys enrolled in school, get a job, and then, down the road, help her get some training for the kind of work she might like in the future. Please let me know if you have any contacts for housing or jobs.

We cannot be indifferent to what is going on around us in the world today. "No man is an island." We are connected, and we must be.

"The Hebrew prophets were the first spiritual leaders to think globally, to conceive of God as transcending national borders and of humanity as a single moral entity. The idea of a global village began in Babylon" (Bruce Feiler, *Where God was Born*, 374), where the people were refugees in exile themselves, and these texts were first written down.

Today the Internet and social media connect us to the world, as never before. Technology in the hands of people everywhere means we hear about refugees, and murders, and demonstrations, tragic shootings, and terrorist attacks. We cannot claim we did not know. And yet, so often we remain indifferent. Many of us post a comment or share an article, but is there not more we can do?

Amos prophesies words of doom for 9 chapters in the Book of Amos. Then finally, at the end of chapter 9, he writes the words of God:

I will improve the circumstances of my people Israel;
they will rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them.
They will plant vineyards and drink their wine;
and they will make gardens and eat their fruit.

I will plant them upon their land,
and they will never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God (14-15).

The people will have to work together. They will have to share the land God gives them. They will have to plant and harvest together. Then the fruit will make good wine; it will not rot in the summer basket. And God will even rebuild the cities. We need our cities to be

rebuilt today—on the principle of justice for all. We need a harvest of fruit that all can enjoy—the landowner, the farm worker, the refugee, and the immigrant. Can we listen for the word of God and keep God's word alive? Can we listen and care, so that we do not find ourselves wandering from sea to sea, without direction?

I pray we have the ears to hear the prophet's call, the will to align ourselves with God's word, and the heart to act as the people of God.