

Caring for the Josephs in Our Lives

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria, the notable men of the first nations...Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music, who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away." Amos 6:1-7

"Woe to those who are at ease in Zion..." our Old Testament reading says; "Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on our couches..."

The use of the word translated as "woe" by Amos, God's 8th century B.C. prophet, is a warning. It carries with it the idea of God's judgment. Amos was trying hard to get the people's attention. You should note that it was meant for both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, both Israel and Judah. Amos' name means "burden" and he had a burden on himself, as he prophesied to the Northern kingdom, God's word also applied to the South.

It is important that one sees the total picture. People rarely stray from God in just one area of their lives. It is more like a simultaneous collapse on several fronts. Knowing that is important in understanding God's judgments and actions. Although things were prosperous and boundaries were expanding, there was much wrong. We are told it was a time of "idolatry, extravagant indulgence...immorality, corruption of judicial procedures and oppression of the poor." (NIV Concordia Self-study Bible) It often seems that when there is prosperity for a nation or its people, it contributes to their forgetting about God.

The shepherd prophet Amos called on Israel to repent of its arrogance or else face disaster. He used an interesting phrase hoping to catch their attention; he said they "are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph." Amos compares the lack of sympathy in Israel, with the lack of sympathy shown by Joseph's brothers while he suffered in the pit.

In the Book of Genesis, Moses wrote the account of how ten brothers were guilty of not loving their neighbor as themselves. The neighbor was their brother Joseph! They not only didn't love him, they sat and ate while he was suffering in a pit without even having water. He cried out in distress, but his brothers didn't care. Then they wound up selling him to some traders, where almost anything might have happened to him. But God's will trumped their plans and Joseph wound up in a high position in Egypt.

Amos used Joseph's story as a way to speak God's Law to God's people. Most of them would have been expected to be very familiar with it, and Amos was hoping it would have an effect on those listening to him. They were used to living lives of ease and didn't care about what was happening to others. They had a "me-first" or "me-only" attitude. So Amos warns them in verses 4-6, "Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on the couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the middle of the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp and like David invent for themselves instruments of music. who drink wine in bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils."

Woe isn't a pleasant word. Woe means "Warning! Pay attention!" They were going to suffer in the near future, and even more importantly, if they did not repent, they would suffer on the Day of the Lord's judgment. The Day of the Lord would not be pretty for those people. Woe to those Israelites!"

The situation in Amos's day has similarities with the situation presented by Jesus in today's Gospel from Luke 16. The rich man cared only for himself and his possessions. He ate well. He wore expensive clothes. Yet his neighbor, Lazarus, the "Joseph" in his life, was begging for food. The rich man didn't care. He was caught up in his own cravings and pleasures. Lazarus died, but was carried away to a better place by the angels. The rich man died and wound up in a place of torment. Woe to all of those who die whose sins have not been forgiven. Statistics showed fewer and fewer people in our country believe there is a hell. They ought to take note that the existence of hell is taught clearly in the Holy Scriptures. Otherwise, why would we need a Savior?

"Woe" is not only spoken to these bad examples, but it is spoken to you and to me. It is spoken to anyone who acts like Joseph's brothers, like Amos's hearers, or like the rich man in today's Gospel. If we fall into a life of living bad examples, and we don't heed the call to nourish our faith and repent of our sins, we could be in trouble. The Lutheran church does not believe in the doctrine of eternal security, which teaches that once you are saved, you can live your life any way you please, and you are going to be all right. There is a reason why Jesus said in John 15:4, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you," and note what he said right after that about those who do not remain in him! He is quoted as saying in Rev. 3:10, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Helping our neighbor is an ongoing task for a Christian. It is your responsibility. It is my responsibility. Why? We have been greatly blessed. We have been baptized into a new life. Jesus' blood, shed for us on the cross, has washed all of our sins away. We have been cleansed of our sins and called to have a new focus in our life instead of focusing on ourselves. Our focus is to be on Jesus and his love for us. Jesus wants your focus to be on him, and by extension, on neighbors and others who are in need. So we care about those who are hungry; we stick up for those who are not receiving justice; we do what we can to bring help to Christians who are being tortured and persecuted because they confess the name of Jesus Christ. Even in our military today, Christians are being persecuted for their beliefs. We need to take a stand and defend these people.

As we assess our own lives, we realize that there are times when we may fail to care for the people God puts in our lives. Because we are still sinners there are missed opportunities, there are oversights, there may be times when we fall back into a "me-first" focus. Thank God for his grace. In his love for us, he has provided for us. He speaks through his Apostle John to tell us, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness 1 Jn. 1:9

Too many Christians neglect this. God wants to help us refocus on Jesus. As I said recently, we need to confess our sins regularly because we sin regularly. That's why an important part of our worship service is confessing our sins and being forgiven. We hear the words of absolution that we have been forgiven of our sins. Forgiven and refreshed, we go forth again and respond to his love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. With God's Gospel power, we care for the "Josephs" in our lives, and we give a proper response to God's mercy for us. Amen.