

“The Resistance”
(Amos 8:1-12, Luke 1:46-55)

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I have always believed that, from a faith perspective, going abroad is a valuable thing to do. Going somewhere different makes it possible to see our faith as it is lived in different settings; to see the world from a different perspective.

And the teachings of the church provide us with such a deep treasure trove of resources for making these encounters, that I don't think there is any new place a person can visit, that will not convict that person with some new word of power and truth that comes from the heart of God. And so I'd like to share a little about the trip Sheryl and I took to Mexico in June.

This morning's reading from Amos, provides just such an instance; a word from the heart of God spoken in a different setting. Amos describes a reality that has been with us ever since his words were recorded, over 2500 years ago and long before. It is a reality from which no culture has ever been free. He describes the willingness of powerful people, driven by greed, to exploit the vulnerable and to defraud them for personal gain. In our reading he calls them out:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

And Amos goes on to respond to that greed in terms that are still wholly recognizable to us today – with righteous anger. It is an anger that is expressed through civil unrest and societal breakdown and even angry mobs. But Amos is very clear about where the anger originates. It is first and foremost God who is angered by those who are led by greed to mistreat others.

Obviously, one sign of the presence of greed in a society is it's impact. There is a conspicuously large and widening gap in wealth between the greedy and those they are exploiting. The rich get alot richer. And the rest get poorer.

I'm not a business major and so I admit to understanding little about how economies actually function - how capital is generated. And I do understand that the profit motive is an incentive that has prompted many innovations that have improved the lives of millions. But it doesn't take a business major to see that too much money is going to

too few places and that some people who work very hard are barely staying afloat, while others who are hardly working are pocketing a ton of money.

A person can make all kinds of arguments about why our system is fair and just or trust that capitalism works like an invisible hand to self-regulate the economy to the benefit of all. But when the person making the argument holds 99 percent of the chocolate bar and you are holding the crumb at the end, the argument doesn't fly. I think that's where we are, and I'm guessing that the God who sees all, is not ok with it.

So what does this have to do with our trip to Mexico? Well, one of the first things that struck us on our trip was how much power was suddenly added to our pocketbook. For what would have gotten us a room in a seedy motel here in the US, we were able to live in a nice house downtown with a private swimming pool and a second floor balcony that looked out on some beautiful trees.

We ate off the top of the menu at local restaurants, we rented a car and drove here and there about the Yucatan peninsula, napped and read on their beautiful beaches and swam among the stalagmites and

stalagmites in cool underground fresh water cenotes. Our money bought us entry into walled-off oases with keyed entries that I would imagine many locals never see, unless they are there to clean up after guests like us.

The city of Merida, where we spent most of our time, is a moderately prosperous place, but here and there, we encountered people who were clearly living in poverty. So, for example, when we parked our car even in free public spaces, someone would often be waiting to wave us in, hoping that we would give them a few pesos.

I do not wish to disparage the people of Mexico in any way by reflecting on the poverty we saw. Everyone we encountered, whether rich or poor, was friendly and polite. Whenever we walked to the city center, strangers exchanged greetings with us all along the way. Merida is, in fact, ranked among the safest cities in the world, and we walked around day or night without fear.

For us to associate Mexico with poverty would be as unseeing as it would be for a visitor to our country to view us all as racists. Of course, we have a problem. But our problems aren't the only thing that defines us.

In fact, my temptation, as I think about our trip is to be self-disparaging. I like living well, dressing well, eating well, and having nice surroundings every bit as much as anyone else does. But what I don't like is "having it all" in front of people who have very little.

To me, there is something wrong with thinking, "Well, you're a good person and I'm a good person, but I've got tons of money and so I am going to enjoy having it all right in front of you. I will even enjoy the things in your neighborhood that you can't even enjoy yourself, because I have money and you don't. And I'm not going to do anything about it, because it works for me. In fact, I can pay you as little as I want to, because you have to accept anything I give you as better than nothing. And by the way, I think you should always be polite to me and come when I call you."

There is a lovelessness, a thoughtless cruelty, in that kind of unspoken arrangement between the haves and have nots that is soul destroying. And you would like to hide behind a wall, where the poor cannot see you living it up, but there is something cowardly and soul destroying in that as well. That willingness to behave as though we are blind to the

dignity and needs of others in these ways is godless. And I am sure that it makes God very angry.

So I guess that I felt a certain guilt, even as we enjoyed the hospitality of the people of Merida and all the wonderful experiences they provided.

But our trip to Mexico was not really about guilt. We also experienced a wonderful grace, that led me to see myself in a new light and to which I would now like to turn, because it makes all the difference.

We Share the Same Faith

While we were in Merida, we went to a small Episcopal church downtown called St. Luke's that has an English service. We befriended the Minister, Rev. Jose Vieira Arruda, attended services and went along one Sunday afternoon to participate in their Good Shepherd ministry among the poor in the south of the city.

While we were there and listening to Rev. Jose's exposition of the Gospel, it became clear to me that the Jesus who was speaking to and through him, is the same Jesus who speaks to me. He spoke a message

in which Jesus comes to free the poor, but also to free all of us from the inhumanity that is brought on us by the worldly powers that be.

I've been around long enough to know the difference between preaching that is scripturally honest and preaching that carefully avoids being critical of the "powers that be". The church has a long history of being the servant and enabler of what Jose called "empire."

But the original words of Jesus and of people like Amos in this morning's scripture are not the words of enablers of the rich and powerful. They are the voices of a resistance to those powers. The voices in the Gospels and in the Bible, through whom the Word of God is channeled to us, are the voices of those who refuse to be dehumanized and victimized by a world order designed to prop up the privileges of some at the expense of the many. They proclaim the alternative, heaven-inspired vision of a God of justice and peace who's will, (as our own often used communion liturgy expresses) is that "sharing by all will mean scarcity for none."

The voice of that resistance rings out clearly in the Magnificat of Mary, where she sings of the world the baby Jesus in her womb will bring about - a world in which the "proud will be scattered in the thoughts of

their hearts, rulers brought down from their thrones, the hungry filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty handed.”

As I thought about the lens through which Rev. Jose preached, it occurred to me that, as comparatively wealthy as Sheryl and I are in this world, that if we are true to our faith, we too are actually part of the same resistance. We pray to the same God who’s righteous will empowers his servants to live an alternate vision to the straight jacket put on us by the greed of those who divide and exploit us. We yearn for the same things the young and poor Mary yearned for.

We Have a Shared Experience

On the way home from Mexico, I was presented with a vivid illustration of the life experience that you and I have in common with each other, with Jose’s English and Spanish speaking congregation, and with the poor who attended the service in the south of Merida. Because as soon as I entered the Merida airport to return home, I was stripped of the privileges that I had been enjoying during the preceding weeks.

Suddenly, I was just another body again. Just a source of revenue for the airline industry.

As we journeyed home, I felt myself being swept back into a world which we are constantly being fed a vision of how wonderful travel is; surrounded by images of smiling flight crews pampering people as they stretch out and enjoy the flight. I remember when it was actually something like that. How, in my childhood, my sister and I were taken up to the cockpit to say hi to the Captain. I remember how the passengers ate from a choice of two hot meals and how the food was served in crockery and with real silverware.

Fast forward to today, where you are lucky to get a bag of peanuts or dried up cracker, where the leg room has been reduced to the point where you feel more like you are cattle being herded into a cattle car, than a pampered customer. What hasn't changed is the messaging that is quietly persuading you that you are actually are being pampered and cared for just as you were in the old days, perhaps even better! I suppose the idea is that if you hear it often enough, you will actually believe it.

I'm sure that in first class, where the seats are a bit roomier and softer, it is much better. And the airlines make a point of impressing on us that, we can have these roomier seats, get more attentive treatment, and get on and off the plane first, if we are willing to pay more. But

most of us, who are not willing or able to pay extra, are paraded through first class, where we see what we are missing out on, and then crammed into the economy section where flying has become more of an ordeal to be endured than a pleasure.

As I thought about this huge contradiction between the vision we are being fed and the reality of the economy in which we live, it became clearer to me that we actually have a lot in common with the poor in Mexico and elsewhere. Although it is true that we live much more affluent lives, it is also true that we know what it is like to be part of a system that dehumanizes us in order to funnel wealth to people who are using sleight of hand to feed their own greed.

Conclusion

As Americans, we can go to Mexico and live a comfortable life off the backs of the poor, and if we take the viewpoint of “empire,” we can see ourselves and the local poor as two alien and separate groups with nothing in common other than that we have money and they need money to survive. They can be to us nothing more than servants with brown skin who’s lives we know nothing, nor care anything about. And we can exploit the advantages we receive from the exchange rate, and

to live off their backs; to live in “first class” in the belief that being in the first class section says something impressive about us.

Or, and this is what for me is the moment of grace! We can recognize that, in fact we are not that different at all, and that we share in common an understanding of what it is like to be exploited, treated as though we are stupid and defrauded by people more powerful than ourselves and by system that supports them in it.

As followers of Jesus, we share with even the poorest of the poor, the same yearning voiced by Mary for a world where we don’t have to play the game of “who sits in first class and who sits in economy” as though the value of a person and how a person should be treated depends on those distinctions.

I do realize that it is naïve to believe that because we see that we have something in common with people living in poverty, that the barriers that separate us from fellowship with the poor will instantly dissolve. But recognizing that we actually do share a common experience and a common desire to resist being dehumanized, is a huge step in dissolving those barriers and being part of the Gospel mission, to bring reconciliation to the world in accordance with the love of Christ.

