

Not a Tame Lion: *The Lord Roars*

Amos 1:1-2:16

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 2/3/2013

Introduction

- ❖ When E. Stanley Jones, the famous missionary to India, noticed how often Mahatma Gandhi would quote the words of Christ, he asked Gandhi why he still appeared to adamantly reject becoming a Christ follower. Gandhi replied, "*Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ.*"
 - In other words, the teaching and person of Christ compelled him, but it was the hypocrisy of Christ's followers that repelled him.

- ❖ Perhaps you know full well what he meant. Some of you are just coming back to church after a long hiatus. Perhaps you grew up going to church but somewhere along the way you got burned by religious hypocrites. It turned you off to the whole thing. But no matter how far or how long you strayed, there was something about Christ that you could never shake. Something about him stayed with you over the years. The fact is you still love Christ. It's just that so many Christians in your life were so unlike him.
 - But here you are. For reasons you can't explain you were compelled to return. Now I understand if you're still skeptical of Christians. We want you to know that we share the same sentiment. We too hate religious hypocrisy. And we especially hate it when such tendencies appear in us.

- ❖ **We admit there is a tendency among Christians to assume our status as God's "chosen people" somehow exempts us from his judgment and entitles us to live by a different standard than all others.**
 - We complain about those who are destroying the institution of marriage by trying to redefine it. It certainly is an issue worth our concern. But are Christians in America any less culpable when our divorce rates are alarmingly high, when more and more Christian singles are co-habiting? We point to certain people groups and say they're the ones ruining marriage and breaking down the traditional family, but we've done a pretty effective job ourselves. It would be hypocrisy to suggest otherwise.

- ❖ We blame those driven by greed for the financial mess our country finds itself in. We point the finger at those whose covetousness led them to buy or sell subprime mortgages and other high-risk investments. We blame crooks who cooked up elaborate Ponzi schemes, and we even condemn their victims for being so foolish to think they could get rich quick.
 - But are American Christians any less culpable of greed and covetousness when we so readily entertain prosperity preaching? When we chase after the same dreams of upward mobility and early retirement? We do things by the book. We're not willing to break any laws. The means may be different, but we're chasing after the same ends.

- ❖ Religious hypocrisy – I hate it. And I hate it most of all when I see it in myself. This is why I look forward to our new series in the book of Amos. It's a six-part series that we're calling "Not a Tame Lion". We got the name from chapter 1:2, "*The LORD roars from Zion and utters his voice from Jerusalem.*"

- **Here the Lord is compared to a ferocious lion whose his voice is described as a roar** (3:8). Note this is not the lazy roar of a yawning lion. This roar is a pouncing roar – the mighty roar of a lion committed to attacking its prey (cf. 3:12).
 - Is it right to attach this kind of imagery to the Lord? Is he really ferocious as a lion? Will he really attack people – even his own chosen people?
- ❖ Such a depiction of God can come as quite a shock, especially to religious hypocrites. Think about it: **The only way you can justify your hypocrisy and actually think you are exempt from judgment and entitled to live by a different standard is to convince yourself that the Lord is a domestic house cat.** There is no way he'll turn and bite you.
 - But they couldn't be more wrong. This is why Amos' depiction of the Lord is a surprise to many. The Lord is not a domestic feline. He is not a tame lion. He is ferocious. He is mighty. And he will pounce on all transgressors and oppressors alike – even among his own people. There is no exemption.

A Shocking Twist

- ❖ This is the overall message of the book. It was written during a period of economic boom and military expansion for Israel. We're told in v1 that this was during the reigns of Uzziah in the southern kingdom of Judah and Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel.
 - At this time, there was one major superpower in the world and that was the Assyrian empire. They were a threat looming on the horizon, but for both Judah and Israel it barely crossed their minds since their governments were fairly stable and they were enjoying a time of prosperity.
- ❖ In fact, Jeroboam II had amassed a sizable army and successfully expanded Israel's northern border. **Israel began to take their strength and prosperity as signs of God's blessing, which reinforced a belief in their national exceptionalism.** Israel looked forward to the "Day of the Lord" – a day of reckoning when God will punish their neighbors.
 - And one day a shepherd from Judah, from a small town called Tekoa, shows up with a word from the Lord. And he begins to pronounce judgement in the form of "war oracles". In those days, prior to battle, kings would call upon prophets to rally the troops for battle by predicting a great victory or assuring everyone that their god is fighting on their side.
- ❖ And Amos starts off doing just that. He gives seven war oracles against Israel's seven neighbors. You can imagine his audience hooting and hollering after each one. Yes, Syria, Philistia, and Phoenicia are going down! The Lion is about to pounce on them. The Day of the Lord is coming for Edom, Ammon, and Moab! And the cheers from Israel just get louder as the Lion's roar turns towards her estranged sister Judah.
 - But then, in chapter 2:6, there is a shocking twist. The Lord begins to roar at Israel! **What they thought was a message of salvation turns out to be a message of judgment.** They thought the Day of the Lord would be a day of vindication. But Amos is saying it actually will be a day of darkness (5:18-20).

- ❖ There is a story about a woman who showed up to church and was delighted to learn the preacher was going to talk about sin. When he preached against drunkenness, she said, "Preach it, brother." When he spoke out against sexual immorality, she nodded and cried, "Amen!" But then the preacher's third point was to condemn gossip, and she leaned over to her neighbor and whispered, "Okay now he's just meddling."
 - I feel like that is how Amos' listeners must have reacted when he got to chapter 2:6. "This guy was preaching great, but now he's just meddling." We love it when prophets and preachers condemn the big sins and big sinners out *there*, but we get very uncomfortable when they shine a spotlight on respectable sins and respectable sinners like us. But that is just hypocrisy.

- ❖ And that is what's going on in Amos. His prophecy is a mix of good and bad news for God's people. I've divided it into three sections. **1)** It's good news to hear that God shows no mercy to those who oppress us – that justice will be served. **2)** But it's bad news to realize that God shows no favoritism – that being his chosen people in no way exempts us from judgment. In fact, it is because we're chosen that he will hold us even more accountable. **3)** But the best news is found at the end of this book where God shows us hope, promising somehow to provide rescue and restoration for all the peoples on earth.

The Lord Shows No Mercy

- ❖ Let's first consider the good news. Considering chapter 1:3 to 2:3, clearly there are times when **1) The Lord shows no mercy**. He is not a tame lion. He is no pushover. He is not a jolly grandpa in the sky who always overlooks your sins and just wants to spoil you with hugs. These verses describe a God filled with righteous anger and ferocious in attack.
 - And at this point, you can imagine this being favorably received by Amos' audience. Judgment is coming for those who have oppressed us. None will escape his justice. How good is that!

- ❖ Israel shared an ugly past with each of these nations. **Syria**, for example, is condemned in v3 for having "threshed Gilead with threshing sledges of iron". Gilead was a region in Israel, east of the Jordan, that shared a border with Syria. The imagery of an iron threshing sledge is quite graphic.
 - Threshing was the process of dividing kernels of wheat from their husks, and one method involved crushing a pile of harvested wheat with a heavy (usually wooden) sledge. To speak of threshing a people with sledges of iron just goes to emphasize the harsh brutality of the Syrian invaders.
 - The same could be said of **Ammon**. V13 paints this horrific scene of raiders ripping open the wombs of pregnant Israelite women. In their attempts to conquer and expand their borders into the region of Gilead, they massacred pregnant women and their unborn children in the attempt to depopulate the region of Israelites. You can imagine why they applauded to hear Amos speak of Syria and Ammon's impending doom.

- ❖ Or we read in vv6 and 9 of how **Philistia** (Gaza), **Phoenicia** (Tyre), and **Edom** were in cahoots, running an organized business of trafficking slaves from Israel. The Philistines were terrorizing Israelite villages and selling the men, women, and children to nations like Edom.
 - V9 says the Phoenicians joined in, and what is worse is that they were betraying political friends. They broke the "*covenant of brotherhood*" (cf. 1 Kg. 16:31). But Edom was worse still, betraying not just political ties but blood ties. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, twin brother to Jacob the father of the Israelites. But kinship duty had apparently been replaced with revenge and bloodlust.
 - So against all these nations and for all their atrocities, the Lord is ready to pounce on them in judgment.

- ❖ **Now some of you might be having a hard time coming to grips with the idea of God punishing nations.** Letting them reap the consequences of their bad behavior is one thing. But we stumble over this idea of God actively punishing people, even wiping out whole nations. Yet here the Lord is saying multiple times that he'll send a fire to devour their strongholds. He says their doom is sure for he will not revoke the punishment.

- ❖ But notice the pattern repeated in each oracle where the Lord says, "*For three transgressions of _____, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.*" This is a way of emphasizing the finality of the judgment. The total adds up to seven, the Hebrew number for completeness.
 - **And the idea behind the ascending number of sins is that God is not acting rashly. He has taken a complete count of the nation's sins.** He is not quick to anger though it would be justified. Rather he withholds punishment until a nation's iniquity is complete (Gen. 15:16).

- ❖ We have to stress this. It would be a mistake to compare God to earthly rulers who go to war against other nations for petty reasons or for personal vendettas or for reasons based on incomplete data or misinformation. **We must not forget the Lord is perfectly righteous in his motives and his reasons are based on all the facts and firmly grounded in truth.**
 - And notice how the judgment against **Moab** is for a sin not committed against Israel but against Edom. That just goes to show God's actions are not based on ethnic biases. He's not just defending his own. **God is equally angered by injustice and oppression in any and every instance.** When he punishes, it is out of righteousness.

- ❖ So thank God that he is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Gen. 34:6). He patiently waits for a nation's iniquity or an individual's iniquity to be complete before he reacts. But the point of these verses is when that point of completion arrives, there is nothing you can do to revoke the punishment. At that point, the Lord will show no mercy.

- ❖ That is good news – though you may have difficulty seeing it at first. **It's because most of us live fairly sheltered lives that we don't know the taste of injustice.** We forget that all around the world (and in our city) the poor and weak and being oppressed by the rich and strong. We're blind to the ugly truth that slavery is still in business all these centuries later.

- **Those who are well attuned to the suffering of the oppressed read a prophecy like this and see good news.** The hand of the tyrant will be broken. The wicked and cunning will finally be held to account. The merciless will be punished without mercy. That is cause for celebration. You can understand why the Israelites were so glad to hear these words of the Lord.

The Lord Shows No Favoritism

- ❖ But here is the rub. **2) The Lord shows no favoritism.** So as we celebrate the Lord's justice against all transgressors and oppressors, we should be sobered to remember that includes us. That is the cold hard truth being expressed in chapter 2:4-16.
- ❖ The lack of favoritism on the Lord's part cuts two ways. **On one hand, he will not give the nations a pass just because they don't know his law.** Paul made clear in Romans 2 that the nations (Gentiles) are *not* judged for *not* keeping God's law (the revealed law written in Scripture), but rather they are judged for suppressing what their consciences know to be right (the moral law written on their hearts). So the nations can't plead ignorance.
 - **But on the other hand, no favoritism means God's chosen people will not be held to a different standard.** In fact, he expects even more from us.
- ❖ Look at chapter 2:4. Notice the same structural pattern of three transgressions and four being used against Judah (and against Israel in v6). That shows that God is consistent in his judgments, holding everyone to the same standard.
 - **But notice how Judah was judged specifically for their rejection of the Law,** which I'm sure resulted in similar acts of oppression and idolatry ("*their lies*" is a reference to false gods). But the focus is on their rejection of God's law.
- ❖ They were privileged. When faced with moral decisions, they didn't have to guess what was right or wrong by searching their fallible consciences. They could search infallible Scripture to know God's good and perfect will.
 - So when they end up practicing the same forms of unrighteousness, God's chosen ones would be foolish to think they'll escape his judgment (Rom. 2:2-3). Instead they'll be held to an even higher degree of accountability.
- ❖ But at this point in vv4-5, Amos' audience doesn't realize it. They're still telling him to preach on. They enjoy hearing about how Judah was to be punished. But then in v6 the tables are turned on them.
 - This oracle against Israel can be divided into two sections. In vv6-8 they are being judged for **sins of commission** – oppressing the weak. But in vv9-12 they're also guilty for **sins of omission** – not imitating their God who protected them when they were being oppressed in Egypt.

- ❖ *So how exactly were they oppressing people?* V6 reveals that the rich among them were victimizing the poor by not giving them enough time to pay off their loans and thus forcing them to sell themselves in slavery. And it says their debt was so insignificant – no more than the cost of a pair of sandals – and yet their lenders showed no mercy.
 - "Trampling the head of the poor into the dust" speaks of physical abuse and humiliation (v7a). "Turning aside the way of the afflicted" refers to the powerful in society manipulating the weak, depriving them of justice (v7b).
 - The mention of a man and his father going in the to same girl is not only a condemnation of sexual immorality, but the word for "girl" suggests a servant girl so again there is a focus on the strong manipulating the defenseless (v7c).

- ❖ And v8 gives two examples of exploitation and religious hypocrisy. We're told they frequented their altars and the house of their god with drink offerings of wine. But they would lie on garments taken in pledge, which the law required them to return by evening since the poor used them as blankets (Ex. 22:25-27). And they weren't offering their own wine for sacrifice but wine collected as fines. The Lord detests such hypocrisy.
 - **These are their sins of commission – victimizing the poor, abusing the weak, and committing egregious sins of a sexual nature.** For these transgression and for more the Lord will not revoke their punishment. Now some of you are thinking, "*Whew, I'm in the clear. I haven't committed any of those sins. And I agree, those who have ought to be punished.*"

- ❖ I'm sure some of Amos' listeners were thinking the same thing. **But then the prophet goes on in vv9-12 to explain their sins of omission** – the duty they failed to perform. They were all guilty for failing to remember God's gracious provision in the past AND for rejecting his attempts to warn them and shame them through the prophets and the Nazirites.
 - Even the Exodus story – the one story that best captures God's provision for the oppressed and his power over oppressors – was neglected or altogether forgotten. The Lord had delivered them from the hands of their enemies and settled them in the land. You would think their response would be of gratitude and faithful obedience – imitating God in fighting on behalf of the oppressed.

- ❖ But they failed in this duty. They were all guilty – both those who oppressed and those who did nothing about it. They tried to shut up his prophets to avoid their convicting speech, and they tried to compromise his Nazirites to destroy their convicting witness.
 - *And what was the consequence?* Vv13-16 predict a devastating defeat for Israel's army. The threat of an Assyrian invasion would finally become a reality, and in no less than 20 years, the northern kingdom of Israel would be no more.

- ❖ It's quite a depressing end to the chapter, but it was necessary. God's chosen people need to realize that their God shows no favoritism. Being chosen does not exempt you from judgment or entitle you to live by a different standard. **Being chosen and being given knowledge of God's Word means he'll hold you to a higher standard.**

- When I'm at the park with my 2-year-old daughter and I witness another child push or hit her, I'm going to break it up. I won't let the oppression continue! But I'm not going to discipline a kid who is not mine. But if it is my daughter pushing or hitting, then it's discipline time because I know that she knows exactly what Daddy expects of her.
- ❖ Christian, as a child of God, you should rest securely in that identity, but don't forget the fact that God disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son or daughter whom he receives (Heb. 12:6). **You and I know exactly what our Heavenly Father expects of us because he written it down in his Word.**
 - **So for us to disobey his Word and transgress his Law, we stand doubly guilty.** Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom much was entrusted much, of him much more will be demand (Lk. 12:48).
 - The whole point of these chapters is to prove that God doesn't show favoritism and that he'll judge his people along with the nations.

The Lord Shows Us Hope

- ❖ Like I said, Amos' prophecy is a mix of good and bad news. **It's bad news to find out you're not exempt from God's judgment just because you're a Christian.** That's bad news. And we need to let it sink in. But I don't want to end there because the best news is yet to come. I want to conclude today by skipping ahead to the very end of Amos' prophecy because that is where the Lord begins to show us some hope.
- ❖ The New Testament apostles actually pick up on this. They saw hope at the end of Amos, and they connected it with the hope that Jesus came to bring. **They realized that God had sent them another shepherd. But this time instead of preaching judgment, this Shepherd would preach rescue and restoration.**
 - In Acts 15, we read about a council held in Jerusalem to discuss the new work happening among them, namely the conversion of the Gentiles (nations). And in the course of their deliberation, the Apostle James stood up and explained from Old Testament Scripture that this was God's plan all along.
- ❖ Starting in v14, James said, *"¹⁴Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, [and here he quotes from Amos 9:11-12] ¹⁶"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, ¹⁸says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old."* (Acts 15:14-18)
- ❖ James recognized that Amos' prediction of God one day raising up the tent of David – that is, to restore his kingdom – was fulfilled when Jesus the son of David was resurrected from the dead and enthroned on high as King of kings and Lord of lords. **Jesus was the chosen man to finish what God's chosen people failed to accomplish.**

- Israel was chosen. **But they weren't chosen for privilege but for mission.** They were a nation blessed to be a channel of blessing for all other nations (Gen. 12:3). But they failed to accomplish this mission.
 - Yet that in no way meant God failed; for in the fullness of time, he sent his Chosen Son to finish the job. Unlike Judah, Jesus perfectly obeyed the law of the Lord and kept all his statutes. Unlike Israel, Jesus defended the weak and laid down his life for the poor and needy. He died on a cross for sinners.

- ❖ **Jesus saves. But not by whisking us away from the Day of the Lord to avoid God's judgment.** Rather Jesus saves by cleansing us of sin and by fulfilling the requirements of the law for us *so that we who receive him by faith can boldly approach the throne of judgement knowing we are being held to the same standard as all the peoples of the earth. That's because we have a standard bearer who stands for us.* A Great High Priest whose name is Love, who ever lives to plead for me.
 - *Because the sinless Savior died / My sinful soul is counted free / For God the just is satisfied / To look on Him and pardon me. . . . Behold Him there, the Risen Lamb / My perfect, spotless righteousness / The great unchangeable I am / The King of glory and of grace!*

- ❖ This is the hope that Amos hints at towards the end of his prophecy. It's the hope of the nations. The nations rejoice in the fact that Lord shows no favoritism. **He holds up everyone to the same standard and yet he holds out to everyone the same offer of salvation to be received by faith in Christ.**

- ❖ If you are one of the many who have received this salvation, let me leave you with this challenge: **You and I were chosen – not for privilege, not for exemption or entitlement – but for mission.** Let us not forget how the Lord rescued us from the greatest of oppression, and let us imitate him now by fighting on behalf of the oppressed.
 - ***Who are the weak, who are the poor and needy, that God is moving towards you or moving you towards?*** In coming weeks, you'll be hearing more about the restart of our Compassion Project, and next Sunday there will be an info session of upcoming summer missions trips. Start to pray now asking God to stir you and move you. May we be a chosen people on mission together.