

At ease in Zion: Amos 6:1-7; Psalm 146

by [Paul Keim](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

Amos was one prophet who knew how to afflict the comfortable. He seemed to have it in for those who had done all right for themselves. His theological motto could well have been: If it feels good, God doesn't like it! Amos skips from warning to judgment to condemnation with a kind of zealous glee. Thus says the Lord, "You're all going to Sheeeooooo!" What a downer. Amos is such a party pooper. Such a curmudgeon. If he showed up at our church, we would do an intervention. Chill out, Amos, we would say. Get yourself into therapy. Obviously you have issues.

I think this is a misreading of Amos and the prophetic school that preserved and extended his legacy. Granted, he was a bit testy. But the times *were* changing, and nobody seemed to notice. When Amos left the farm and ventured north into Israel in the eighth century, business was booming. Some people were doing well, but according to Amos they weren't doing *right*. Amos saw an affluence that had turned the hearts of the haves from the needs of the have-nots. The robust piety of the rich was shrill and self-serving. Amos linked their neglect of the poor to the ominous signs of international politics and warned that devastation was coming. But the political and religious leaders of the north were not convinced.

We humans have a highly developed facility for denial. We imagine ourselves to be invincible. Sure, we're aware that nations have come and gone, that great civilizations have fallen and disappeared. But we tell ourselves that we're smarter and stronger than they were. Their fate has nothing to do with us. We put off the evil day and convince ourselves that every day, in every way, we're getting better and better. In the meantime the status quo must be maintained—with violence, if necessary.

What we see depends on what we look at, and what we look at depends on what we think is important. And what could be more important than ensuring our security? We look for signs that the ease and comfort we have come to accept as both a birthright and a reward for our virtues will persist indefinitely. We see plenty of reason to be confident. Yes, there are those who see things another way, but they are alarmists, prophets of doom, unpatriotic nabobs of negativism who unwittingly

give aid and comfort to our enemies.

What's wrong with sleeping on a nice bed? Is indulgence in the occasional rack of lamb or veal cutlet such a sin? What's so bad about playing edifying music while sipping a little wine? Or taking long, hot showers?

The problem with those at ease in Zion, according to Amos, was that their comfort had robbed them of empathy. They were not grieved over the ruin of Joseph, and this blinded them to the moral analogy between that loss and their own impending disaster. Walter Brueggemann tells us that the first stage in prophetic criticism is embracing grief. The other's loss is also our loss: it should hurt like hell. If it doesn't, then something inside of us has died.

Grieving rituals are powerful because they belie the myth of eternal prosperity. They shake the edifice of our brittle confidence. They punch through our numbness and remind us that life is full of pain and suffering. They also propel us from the lethargy of false hopes and make it possible for us to experience true joy, true peace, true security. No, there is nothing inherently wrong with ease, comfort and security. But when the pursuit or maintenance of these transient goals is at the center of our universe, then the messengers of the Lord will speak out.

Psalm 146 is one of the "hallelujah" songs that make up the concluding doxology of the Psalter. We have been socialized to think of praise as a kind of mindless exaltation of God, but biblical praise of the Creator is deeply ethical. It spells out a moral trajectory. At the heart is an inherent tension between the sovereignty of God and that of earthly authorities. We are admonished not to trust in "princes"—or any mortals, for that matter. Perhaps some are trustworthy, even godly. But their powers (for good and evil) are limited.

Happiness is to be found with God, where true help and hope reside. The cause for this is the very nature of the Creator. The oneness of God combines the functions of Maker of heaven and earth and Keeper of faithfulness. The Creator of the world is also the one who executes justice, provides food, sets free, opens eyes, lifts up and loves. It is the sovereignty of God that endures.

We are too willing to concede God's sovereignty and glibly declare God to be Lord of heaven and earth in our prayers and hymns and sermons. Since the biblical language has become dissociated from real politics, it costs us nothing. God can be king and lord, sovereign of the universe, and threaten no ruling politician or

government. We become aware of the inherent tension of a moral creation theology only when we translate the politics of divine sovereignty into our own terms: God is president and head of state. God's government has enacted laws that must be obeyed. God has a special burden for those neglected by governing authorities.

So how then does the presidency of God relate to the presidency of the president? What belongs to the President of the universe, and what belongs to the president of the land? Does the loyalty owed the One ever conflict with the loyalty owed the other? Perhaps it is enough just to ask the question. And to keep in mind that God reigns for all generations. Hallelujah!