

Hell - Full or Empty?
Amos 7: 7-17 Colossians 1: 3 - 10
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The prophets of the Old Testament, Amos being one of them, had almost indescribable obstacles trying to turn the Canaanite people from idol and multi-god worship to the worship of the one true God. On the other hand, the New Testament writers had, well, Jesus. However, all the people in both the Old and New Testaments were very describable as human.

Amos paints a picture of a people who have fallen away from the center of their faith. The temptations of power, greed, lust and injustice have overtaken the Israelites including King Jeroboam and the chief priest, Amaziah. Corruption throughout the land, from palace to sanctuary have led to a forgetting of the Lord's providence over their lives. So, God chooses Amos, a simple farmer out in the countryside to bring the word of the Lord to the King. Amos has no power; he knows nothing of the politics. All Amos knows is that God called him, to speak truth to power; and the truth wasn't pretty. Amos' mission is to call the reproachable to see the reality of their broken lives and warn them of the consequences of their sins against God. He doesn't use his own words but God's words. The disaster and destruction of Jerusalem including the exile of the Israelites of which Amos prophesied, do come to pass.

Wanton disobedience of the Lord; loss of home and land and family connections; slavery or alienation in a strange country with a completely different culture and language for generations. Sounds like a description of Hell.

But also today we heard the reading of a letter to the faith community at Colossae. The beginning of this letter is full of praise as to how the "word of truth" is growing because these people "heard and comprehended the grace of God." They are commended for their "love of Christ Jesus and of the love for all the saints." These people are offered hope of spiritual wisdom and understanding. Their lives reflect a joyful response to God's good gifts which increase their faith and loving kindness to one another. They live in the confidence of "the hope laid up for you in heaven" - Yeah - of the two, this would be my choice.

Heaven or Hell - how does one decide?

There is a third reading for today which is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The distinction of "Good" is always included in this story because to those in Israel at this time, there were no "good" Samaritans - except perhaps this one man. To the Jews, the Samaritans were the lowest of the low. Think of someone where you would prefer to die before they helped you - that would be this Samaritan on the road to Jericho. As we know there had been two other travelers who could have helped, but didn't. The associate pastor of the big steeple church in town and the clerk of session - both went right by the poor, helpless victim who by the way happened to be a congregation member (well actually they hadn't joined yet...), barely glancing his way. Just didn't seem like how either of them would react. Then the most unlikely person immediately jumped in to help the injured. Giving no thought at all to race or

religion, sexual orientation or political affiliation, whether this person had AIDS or a cold, where his family came from or what church he went to, the only thought was to help a person who needed help. No questions asked. How often are our hearts there?

Were there no faithful, God-centered people in Israel at the time of King Jeroboam? People who kept family and home together without sacrificing to idols but worshiped a God who loved them and brought them out of slavery to a land of milk and honey? Were there Colossians who fell short of praise worthy commendations by failing to follow specific religious practices that caused this letter to be written?

The answers are yes, yes and yes.

Can the goodness or badness of a person be judged by a single action taken or not taken? No except in a parable where a point is being made. Our lives are a composite of good and bad and questionable deeds, usually none of them outstanding enough to mark a person's whole life as good or bad. And if we think that we just need to keep trying so the balance of our lives is weighted more on the good side than bad, once again we fall short of the meaning of this parable.

What is the first and greatest commandment? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your might and all your mind. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

The point of the parable of the Good Samaritan is not who is good or who is bad (or even their behavior). The point is that our loving God who is also our judge, knows the condition of our hearts and is able to determine the strength of our love for God and for neighbor.

So the answer to the question: "Hell - full or empty?" remains a mystery held next to the heart of God. Our God judges us and our actions, not keeping score, but discerning the motives of our hearts. Our God judges us and our action but acts with loving kindness and mercy. We often fail to act justly, or to love kindness and walk humbly with God. The good news is that our God created each of us, in God's image, friend and foe, good and bad, to be loved. And that is what is required of us. Go and do likewise.