Is God's Presence Good or Bad News?

Scripture: Amos 5:18-24
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How does God enter our presence? Starting with our worship, we believe that God is very present in our sanctuary. We particularly look for Christ's presence in the breaking of bread, in the public reading of the Word, and in the community of 2 or more coming together.

In our day to day lives, we recognize God's presence when we feel deeply at peace in a way beyond description. We also encounter God through the people we meet, the faces we see, especially those truly in need. God also promises to be with us always until the end of the age. Though we might not always be mindful of it, God is essentially with us at all times.

God is also free to be present with us at any particular moment. While we might most often think of God's presence as peaceful, it is also revealing. God's presence is not always good news for those who participate in unjust systems. We must not try to domesticate God into guarantor of privilege.

Our text this week begins with a warning about desiring the day of the Lord. In our time, many misinterpret the potential problem of the day of the Lord. First off, many try to predict it. If not with an actual date, they proclaim that we are living in the "end times." A sizable percentage of our population believe that today. What Jesus says about the day and hour is that only the Father knows. So, anyone trying to proclaim that they know we are in the end times are saying they know more than Jesus. Some take it further and tell people what they need to believe and even sometimes who they must vote for in government elections. Now, to consider the return of Christ at the end of history is a very Christian reading of Amos' text and not necessarily what Amos is speaking about. It is even worse when preachers hijack the story to strike fear in their hearers about right belief and to whom we must give our loyalty to. Either way, the same truth applies. Ultimately, God seeks to redeem us and to restore all things. God seeks to renew heaven and earth. And this is good news. But what happens during the restorative process when one is part of the problem?

God's light illuminates everything about us and our culture. When people are praising God, but living selfishly, especially to the point of harming others for personal gain, they practice corrupted worship.

In the time of Amos, the people put out their offerings, but ignored God's commandments in public life. Injustice was rampant, oppression was very real. Perhaps a contemporary comparison are people demanding to post the 10 Commandments in schools while simultaneously calling for an end for free school lunches for poor children in the same

community. That is music God does not wish to hear (v. 23). How ironic to post God's commands for treating God and one another, while doing the opposite.
Even when our sanctuary is beautiful, the music and liturgy are well done, and we hear good preaching with theological precision, if these things exist alongside indifference to human suffering, we miss the point.

Amos calls to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It is a simple, yet profound vision to live by values we hopefully learned at home and in kindergarten. Honesty, integrity, fairness, protection of the vulnerable, and restoring what is broken or wrong. It is not justice as merely punishment, but rather the living and social expression of God's character.

The day of the Lord is a calling to live by God's standards rather than our own preferences. When we are selfish, the day of the Lord is like escaping from a lion only to run into a bear. God's light will illuminate everything about us. In that moment, God's presence can be scary. Prophetic vision is reordering communal life according to God's purposes. It is evidence of God's reign already breaking into the world.

Jesus delivered his first public sermon in his own hometown with a similar prophetic vision. Jesus was challenged to tell his own people they were part of the problem.

As I am very blessed in recent years, I do not have the burden of bearing bad news today.

I had the opportunity to witness our congregation getting together back in the summer to begin preparations for yesterday's annual holiday Bazaar. People gathered in church and in their homes to work on planning and projects together all for a few hours of opening our doors to the wider community. We knew it was in part a fundraiser, yet so much more. There were many hours of fellowship in the preparation, and ultimately a chance to welcome people from outside of our congregation. People got to catch up with people they have not seen in years and, in some cases, met new people. Jesus had to speak to his people about leaving out those who were different from them. Fortunately, we learned to do what Jesus compels us to do somewhere along the way.

Perhaps that is what Amos ultimately hopes to see. Not worship abandoned, but worship made visible in the way people treat one another. Yesterday's Bazaar was never just about crafts, food, or fundraising. It was about doors being opened, friendships renewed, strangers welcomed, and a community choosing generosity over isolation. In those simple acts, justice begins to roll like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. God's presence is not confined to the sanctuary, though God is certainly here. God's presence is revealed whenever love becomes tangible, whenever neighbors are embraced, whenever the vulnerable are remembered, and whenever a community reflects God's own generosity. The Day of the Lord need not be feared by those who are already learning to live in God's light.

For when worship flows beyond these walls and into the life of the world, we discover that the God who meets us at this table is the same God already at work among us, renewing our community through one small act of faith at a time. It was not the Bazaar itself that aligns us with God's purposes, it is the way we practice.

Let us continue to welcome the stranger and love the neighbor until justice indeed rolls down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. That is music to God's ears and God's glorious presence among us.