

**Summer Series: *Wrestling with Tough Texts, With God, Together***

At First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

9:30–10:15 AM – Open Forum and Bible Study with the Pastor

10:30 AM – Worship the Living Christ, with Open Communion

- July 7 Matthew 22: 15-22 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“Render Unto Caesar...”*  
Subject to Ponder: One Nation...Under God
- July 14 Genesis 22: 1-19 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“The Sacrifice of Isaac”*  
Subject to Ponder: Priorities and Providential Care
- July 21 I Timothy 2:8-15 Rev. Anna Strickland  
Sermon Title: *“As Is Proper for Women”*  
Subject to Ponder: Proper Roles for Women: Wife & Mother?
- July 28 Judges 19:1-30 Rev. Anna Strickland  
Sermon Title: *“Has Such A Thing Ever Happened?”*  
Subject to Ponder: Brutality and Silence in Scripture
- Aug 4 Amos 7: 1-6 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“The Lord Relented”*  
Subject to Ponder: Talking God Out of Vengeance
- Aug 11 Leviticus 18: 22; 20: 13 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“So-Called Clobber Texts”*  
Subject to Ponder: Human Sexuality and the Holy Bible
- Aug 18 Job 2: 1-10 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“Skin for Skin, Said the Adversary”*  
Subject to Ponder: God Made a Deal with the Devil
- Aug 25 Matthew 19: 1-12 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“Is There Life After Divorce”*  
Subject to Ponder: Jesus Weighs In On the Matter

***“The Lord Relented”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 4, 2019

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Amos 7:1-9**

*Locusts, Fire, and a Plumb Line*

*This is what the Lord God showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king’s mowings).<sup>2</sup> When they had*

*finished eating the grass of the land, I said, "O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!"*<sup>3</sup> *The Lord relented concerning this. "It shall not be," said the Lord.*

*<sup>4</sup> This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord God was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. <sup>5</sup> Then I said, "O Lord God, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" <sup>6</sup> The Lord relented concerning this. "This also shall not be," said the Lord God.*

*<sup>7</sup> This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup> And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; <sup>9</sup> the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."*

After her mother finished her bedtime story,  
the child closed her eyes and offered to God her evening prayer.

*"Dear God, Aunt Harriet still has a cold.*

*Uncle Hubert is still out of work.*

*Daddy's hair is still falling out.*

*To be perfectly honest,*

*I am getting tired of telling you all my family's troubles  
without getting any results!"*

### **Amos the Intercessor**

Sounds like the title of a movie, or a summer novel, or a warrior.

A prayer warrior, more likely.

We tend to think of intercessory prayer as going from earth to heaven;

we know Amos, however, as one who served as an intercessor for the Lord,

interceding on behalf of the Holy One

to the whole people of God,

Divine Truth spoken in love,

blessings and admonitions from heaven to earth.

Amos may be best known from these words from Chapter 5,

spoken as a mouthpiece for the Lord:

*"I hate, I despise your feasts,*

*and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

*Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,*

*I will not accept them,*

*and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts*

*I will not look upon.*

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;*

*to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5: 21-24)*

### **Amos the Intercessor**

An intercessor is one who intercedes on behalf of another soul  
or on behalf of a whole body of souls.

This takes courage and a bit of chutzpah.

Intercessors like Amos, like you and me, like Jesus Christ and His Church, are bold!

Intercession is daring, a bold act,

fearlessly, faithfully asking forgiveness, seeking mercy, holding out for grace  
because you know, you know the character of God.

Amos knew the character of God.

Amos was well read, aware that the Book of Exodus, the Psalms,  
and his Hebrew neighbors in the 12 Tribes of Israel  
all celebrated a key character of God: patience.

Exodus and the Psalms lifted songs from earth to heaven:

*“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”*

(Exodus 34: 6; see also Psalm 103: 13-14)

Ah, this is a God we can follow, we can love, can speak to about our innermost need.

It is in the very character of the Lord to remember that we are dust,

that we are made and will return to the One Who Created and Creates,  
that with God we have a covenantal relationship grounded in love,  
for we are God’s people and the Lord is our God,

The character of God is to always respond, one way or another,

at God’s discretion, in God’s timing, with God-sized portions,  
portions that are abundant, extravagant, overflowing,  
spilling out, spilling over, anointing, blessing, redeeming.

It is the nature and nurture of God to offer and provide with such abundance.

It is God’s forgiveness and mercy and grace we seek.

So we send up and out our appeals,

and we wait with pregnant expectation.

### **Amos the Intercessor**

Like Amos, who conversed with God,

we intercede, we appeal, beseech, and pray fervently  
on behalf of our beloved friends and family,  
for neighbors we know

and those we have yet to meet yet care about

because we know deep down inside  
that we are somehow connected.

We may intercede on behalf of ourselves,  
telling God all about our souls, our bodies, our very life and livelihood.  
We intercede because we expect, we trust that something good will come of it.

Like Amos, our intercessory action sometimes comes out of empathy,  
out of an inner compassion,  
a love and compassion we embody, together.

We intercede because we care and can do no other.

We have this divine compassion that bubbles up from within  
and reaches out to support and serve someone else's need.

We intercede because we expect, we trust that something good will come of it.

Sometimes our intercessory action comes from a place of anger.

Not like the anger you express when someone inadvertently steps on your toe;  
we're talking about the anger that rises up and wants to explode  
whenever someone purposefully steps on a whole lot of innocent toes.

Once on a church-sponsored Habitat for Humanity build,  
I hit my thumb with a hammer.

Suddenly everyone around me stopped to listen, waiting to hear  
what words a preacher used when he hit his thumb with a hammer.

Well, what words should Christians use  
when someone strikes a whole bunch of thumbs, on purpose?

So, like Amos, we intercede with a well-thought out anger,  
a righteous anger,  
an anger at wrongs and wrongdoing,  
at injustice and inequality, senseless violence and violated bodies,  
at ineffectual leadership and blind followership,  
at unfed hungers and unmet wants.

We intercede because we expect, we trust that something good will come of it.

Like Amos, we intercede sometimes from a place of hope.

Hope is a divine gift that helps you catch a vision of a better tomorrow,  
to see it, reach for it, and bring that vision, that dream, into today's reality.

*"...we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand,"* said the Apostle Paul,  
*"and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.*

*More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,  
knowing that suffering produces endurance,  
and endurance produces character,  
and character produces hope,  
and hope does not disappoint us,  
because God's love has been poured into our hearts*

*through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”*  
“God proves [God’s] love for us  
in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5: 2b-5, 8)

We intercede because we expect, we trust that something good will come of it.

## **Amos the Intercessor**

The book of Amos is listed as one of the Minor Prophets,  
yet there is nothing minor about his impact.

“The book of Amos is the earliest of the prophetic books.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The prophetic preaching started by Amos

“continues in Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Zephaniah;  
early parts of Jeremiah and Ezekiel;  
and then it comes to an end.”<sup>[2]</sup>

“[Amos] marks the beginning of a unique tradition in the history of religion:  
prophecies of the approaching end of the existence of God’s people  
based upon God’s judgment of them  
for failing to live according to the divine standards.”<sup>[3]</sup>

In other words, our first prophets warned us to do good, be good, love and live,  
belong, behave, and believe like God requires,  
because if and when you don’t, beware!

The known biography of Amos is short and to the point.

*“I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son;  
but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees,  
and the Lord took me from following the flock,  
and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”* (Amos 7:14b-15)

He rarely spoke about himself;

you can say that he was other-centered, God-centered, authentic and blunt.

The prophecy of Amos begins locally and then goes nationwide.

He preaches God’s Word to the 12 Tribes of Israel.

He walks the streets and goes into temples;

he chastises the people for their sins and wrongdoing in the sight of God;  
he brings a dire warning that the Lord  
will bring down destruction and desolation.

See if this sounds familiar:

Amos’ preaching reached the ears of those in high places,  
and the results were predictable.<sup>[4]</sup>

His attacks on social predators and false worship

threatened the political-religious establishment.

Their interests were vested in precisely those abuses which Amos exposed.

High priest Amaziah sought to cast Amos out, and looked for support.

Since the temple at Bethel, like the temple at Jerusalem,  
was protected by the King of Israel,  
high priest Amaziah was supported by powers on high.  
Amos was basically told to love his country or leave it...or else.  
Sound familiar?  
Remind you of threats made to Jeremiah? John the Baptist? Jesus of Nazareth?  
So many of our modern prophets and truth speakers?  
Amos, however, chose to stay, regardless of the cost.  
Maybe his credo was "Love it or change it."  
He certainly loved God and God's people,  
and interceded for positive change in the worst way, in the best way.

### **Amos the Intercessor**

...was also an oracle.  
He was a man of visions,  
who had dreams of conversations with God.  
He then interpreted & proclaimed the dialogues as Divine Truth.  
In the 7<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Amos,  
we receive the first visions,  
dire warnings that first locusts and then fire will punish a sinful people.

*This is what the Lord God showed me:*

*he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout  
(it was the latter growth after the king's mowings).*

<sup>2</sup> *When they had finished eating the grass of the land,*

*I said, "O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!"<sup>3</sup> The Lord relented concerning this.*

*"It shall not be," said the Lord.*

Amos takes it upon himself to appeal to God on the people's behalf.

*"O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!"*

'He is so small' refers to Israel.

Amos appeals to the character of God

whom he knows and we know weeps when we weep,

hears the cries of the oppressed, heals the sick and gives sight to the blind.

Amos knows that God protects people rescued from slavery;

nurtures widows and orphans who have no one else;

advocates for the poor and aliens in our midst.

Amos prays that God will relent.

To repent means to turn 180°,

to turn away from sinful behavior,

to move toward the ways of God.

To relent is more akin to what God was asked to do,

and exactly what the Lord chose.  
Amos successfully intervenes; the appeal is heard.  
God does relent, saying *"It shall not be."*  
The locusts and the fire will not happen.  
However...the full request of Amos is not granted.  
God's destruction of Israel is postponed, delayed, set aside for the time being.  
The forgiveness Amos pleaded for is withheld.

The Hebrew word used here for forgiveness is **"sālah"**  
in which God alone is the subject.

Typically in the Bible, the human experience of repentance is followed by forgiveness.  
*"I am so sorry; I promise to change"* is followed by *"You are forgiven; sin no more."*  
Not here, not according to Amos!  
Neither is it in the case of Moses (Exodus 32).  
After the Hebrews worship a golden calf and God promises to destroy them,  
Moses appeals to God to relent,  
appealing not on the basis of the Hebrew's behavior or qualities,  
but rather on the basis of God's character.  
Both Moses and Amos were convinced  
that God has to make the first move, the first step.

President George Herbert Walker Bush loved to tell the story  
of the child who offered this simple prayer:  
*"God, bless my parents, my brother and sister,  
and God, take care of Yourself,  
because if anything happens to You, we are all sunk!"*  
Without God, we are all sunk.

You see, God's loving, forgiving nature is what makes it possible for people to change.<sup>[5]</sup>  
Our repentance and transformation are the result of trusting that God is forgiving,  
that God makes the first step toward us.

This is made abundantly clear in the New Testament:  
God--and God alone--makes the first move, which is toward us.  
The redeeming work of God in Christ Jesus  
had nothing to do with human initiatives.  
As Paul said, *"God proves [God's] love for us  
in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."* (Romans 5: 8)

Amos interceded because he understood, he believed,  
he had the conviction that if there is any hope for us,  
it's that God is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.<sup>[6]</sup>

I wonder whether we wrestle with this scripture, this testimony  
because it's humbling, reminding us to trust in God to make the first move,  
to reach for us. If there is any hope, it is that God is merciful.

I wonder whether we wrestle with trusting in the mercy of God  
because sometimes we are not, not merciful and as kind as we ought.  
We may struggle with being scolded by the Word,  
with being examined and turned inside out,  
yet the Word teaches that -- first and foremost -- we are loved,  
which eases the path to change and transformation.

I wonder whether after hearing that even God can relent,  
and that forgiveness starts with the holy,  
it may provide a path for some of us to be personally transformed.

I wonder whether such an interpretation of scripture  
might lead some people to be turned off, to tune out,  
to prefer an unalterable God who is the same from age to age.

I wonder about the emphasis many people place in Jeremiah's proclamation in 29:11.  
*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord,  
'plans to prosper you and not to harm you,  
plans to give you hope and a future.'"*

A God who makes never-changing plans is a never-changing God,  
which some folks find comforting and is quite understandable in a chaotic world.

Debie Thomas wrestles with this idea of a plan-making God.

*"If God had a plan, then at every possible fork in the road  
God was making intentional choices to act or not to act,  
and those choices were pre-scripted.*

*(Mack truck about to hit toddler—divert or not?*

*Cancer about to kill young woman—heal or not?*

*Mass shooter about to enter elementary school—intervene or not?)*

*If God had a plan, then the divine capacity for empathy  
—for genuine surprise, true horror, unyielding sorrow—  
couldn't help but be blunted.*

*Why would anyone grieve their own perfect plan?*

*Though the process of letting go was very hard,*

*I no longer cling to the plan.*

*I believe in something more tender, riskier, more fragile.*

*I believe that human freedom isn't an illusion; it's the real deal.*

*God works with the free choices we make in the free universe we live in.*

*God dreams for us, hopes with us, and grieves with us in real time.*

*God works in subtle, mysterious ways,*



*always and everywhere,  
to redeem us without violating our freedom.<sup>[2]</sup>*

I wonder what Amos thinks of this contrast, God as planner and God as dreamer.  
Amos the Intercessor, the Oracle, the Dreamer,  
    communes with a God whose character is not only the source of forgiveness,  
    God appears flexible, working in real time, affirming free will,  
        slow to anger, sure to love,  
        capable of bringing an end  
            as well as offering new beginnings.

For Amos, God's designs and dispositions are more akin to dreams.  
God is a dreamer, with dreams for us to live out and live into and love for.  
Walter Brueggeman said, *"We carry the dreams of God in our daring bodies."*

Divine dreams come to fruition in our daring bodies,  
    especially when we embody the character of God ourselves,  
    becoming goodness and mercy with some skin on it.  
I wonder if our Lord has a dream, a prayer, a hope for each of us  
    and all of us, together.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

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<sup>[1]</sup> [The New Interpreter's Bible](#), Volume VII, Abingdon Press, 1990. P. 339.

<sup>[2]</sup> [The New Interpreter's Bible](#). P. 339.

<sup>[3]</sup> [The New Interpreter's Bible](#). P. 339.

<sup>[4]</sup> [Texts for Preaching: Year C](#), Ed. By Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, & Newsome. Westminster Press. 1994. P. 421.

<sup>[5]</sup> [The New Interpreter's Bible](#). P. 409.

<sup>[6]</sup> [The New Interpreter's Bible](#), P. 409.

<sup>[7]</sup> "Faith Matters: The Plan and the Dream" by Debie Thomas, [Christian Century Magazine](#), July 3, 2019.