

The Consequences of "Moral Decay"  
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Amos 8:1-12

Every so often, we hear a preacher moaning about "moral decay in America." Usually it has to do with a perceived decline in personal relationships and so-called family values, which center around a stereotypical White suburban family, with a mom, and dad, 2.5 kids, a dog, a picket fence, and a minivan parked in the driveway.<sup>1</sup> But what does the phrase "moral decay" *really* mean? For some people, it points to an increased reliance on sources outside of religion for learning about what makes a person and their actions "good." For others, it's marked primarily by the decay and dysfunction in parts of our political system. And for still others, especially the leaders of the so-called Moral Majority, which was founded by Jerry Falwell in the late 1970s, it became a clarion call to enlist politicians to reverse the trends of expanding the guarantee of civil rights for women, the LGBTQ community, and generally anyone else who fit their definition of "sinner."<sup>2</sup> Historian Kristen Du Mez, in her book *Jesus and John Wayne*, notes that Falwell in particular believed he was "fighting... a war to resist feminism, abortion on demand, government intervention in the family, the abandonment of Taiwan, IRS interference in Christian schools, children's rights, and 'rampant

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, "Pastoral Perspective: Amos 8:1-12. In *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 244

<sup>2</sup> Doug Banwart, "Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority, and the 1980 Election." <http://www.wiu.edu/cas/history/wihr/pdfs/Banwart-MoralMajorityVol5.pdf> [accessed July 12, 2022].

homosexuality' – the very things that had corrupted the nation's morals and blunted its ability to resist communism."<sup>3</sup>

More recently, we've seen the message of "our country is rotting on the vine because we've forgotten our basic, Christianish moral teachings!" has been picked up in other ways. Leaders like the Rev. Dr. William Barber of the Poor People's Campaign have pointed out that "moral decay" is much more about the hoarding of money and material resources by a few at the expense of the many, and that it provides the cover story for upholding White patriarchy. As Bernie Sanders points out every chance he gets, the super rich keep getting richer. Their M.O. is two-fold. It relies on exploiting the working poor and passing laws designed to help them avoid paying their fair share in taxes. It's really antithetical to the fact of God's abundantly providing for human need. It's also a serious miscarriage of justice when there isn't enough to go around because a small group has given in to the sin of pure, unadulterated greed.

It's an old problem, probably at least as old as humanity itself. The prophet Amos wrote about it in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, in the shadow of the Assyrian invasion which one of the editorial voices in the Hebrew Scriptures tend to view as "the beginning of the end." The theological explanation they advance for this attack, and, 200 years later, for the Babylonian Exile, is that the people and their rulers had done what was evil in the sight of God. They had to pay the price for their lack of attention to everything from proper worship of God to ensuring that the vulnerable people are cared for. It's a price which would culminate in the eventual destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its people, readily allowed by a frustrated God who did not come to their defense.

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<sup>3</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liverlight Publishing, 2020), 99.

The excerpt from Chapter 7 that we heard last week, where God sets a plumb line up in Israel and finds it's not on the straight and narrow, contains the warning. Here, we have God laying out exactly what's going to happen if they don't straighten up and fly right: "The time is surely coming, says the LORD GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it" (Amos 8:11-12, NRSV)

Are Amos and God exaggerating? Maybe. However, the use of hyperbole makes a point: the presence of an abundance of resources should serve as a caution that there can be famine, disaster, and, finally, abandonment by God. It helps us to see that living in an unjust society "... can make it nearly impossible to hear God's words. His almost unthinkable images dramatize an almost unthinkable situation: a world in which God's words cannot be heard. Amos shows... [the prophet's] words must silence society's discrediting religious noise and political spin long enough for people to hear simple words of justice."<sup>4</sup>

God's version of justice demands several things from God's people, where justice is defined as ensuring the conditions exist for humanity to flourish. It requires care for the marginalized. It requires those who have resources to share with those who lack them. It also demands doing the exact opposite of trampling on the needy, bringing ruin to the poor of the land, and practicing deceit with false balances. Ultimately,

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<sup>4</sup> Willis Jenkins, "Theological Perspective: Amos 8:1-12. In *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 246.

"...according to Amos, to be a person of faith is to be dependent upon and tethered to the righteous judgments of God."<sup>5</sup>

Amos' warning is not that of someone whose end goal is to ensure that the nation does things exactly in the ways he wants them done. Prophets in ancient Israel were primarily truth tellers. Very often, the truths they spoke about what was happening, particularly when those truths challenged the status quo and/or the ruling class, were not well received. Their visions nearly always contain words of hope alongside the words of warning. It's not too late to mend your ways. God is still present, especially in the re-ordering of things to look much more like God's hopes and dreams for humanity than the hopes and dreams of the rich and powerful. Not getting with the program comes at a cost to the entire community. The poor and marginalized suffer as a result of their lack of resources. The super rich very often lose their ability to show empathy or compassion, and can become far less willing to share what they have because they're too busy trying to get it all for themselves. I'd wager that most of the rest of us fall solidly between these two extremes, complete with the challenge of figuring out how our "middle-ness" might be used both to boost the poor and to hold the super rich to account. Thing is, the problem is almost too big for us to fix by ourselves on a systemic scale. But we can do justice at a micro level. We can choose to not to engage in the ill treatment of others which Amos condemns. We can also choose not to give in in to the real moral decay that happens when we forget our obligation to love our neighbors as ourselves. God has told us what is good: "what does the LORD require... but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8).

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<sup>5</sup> Willimon, "Pastoral Perspective: Amos 8:1-12."