

Lice. Brussel sprouts. Root canals. Used car salesmen. Traffic jams. Cockroaches. These are a few of America's least favorite things. And yet, they are all things that have a higher approval rating than Congress.

Several years ago, a political pollster decided that simply saying that Congress had a 9% - yes 9% - approval rating was just not very effective. And so they conducted a survey asking people which one they held a more favorable attitude towards: Congress or one of several distasteful alternatives. Lice, root canals, and cockroaches won out.

I suppose there's some consolation for Congress, though. They didn't lose every match-up. Congress still had a higher approval rating than the ebola virus, meth labs, and Lindsey Lohan. So that's something.

We laugh over data like this because, if we didn't, we'd end up crying. No matter what end of the political spectrum you fall on, I think we can all agree that the federal government isn't always a very effective, efficient, or ethical institution. And Congress, most of all, seems to take the blame.

As a good Christian man, I feel a Biblical duty to respect and honor those given the task of governing. But at the same time, as a U.S. citizen, I can't help but be a little depressed when I look at the leadership of our nation overall. And more than a little anxious about what the future holds.

And so, in a weird way, I'm comforted by the words of Amos in our Old Testament Lesson today. Not because he gives me any hope. But because he provides empathy and commiseration in our misery. Simply put, history always repeats itself. There is nothing new under the sun. And Amos' message is proof that people have always been disappointed by their leaders.

He begins by telling us that there has been a meeting. A meeting of “*notable men of the first of the nations.*” There's been an international summit. A sort of rudimentary United Nations.

Yet, this meeting hasn't been arranged for political reason, but for cultural ones. Somebody has died. One of these notable men, most likely, has passed away. And they are holding a funeral dinner in his honor. But this isn't a funeral dinner like you've ever seen. It's a “Marzeah” feast. An ancient ritual to celebrate a person's life and death with a massive party.

The fattened calves are slaughtered. The wine flows not in cups, but in bowls. And the greatest of the guests at the party do not stand around and mingle. No, they lie on beds of ivory. We've actually found these beds of ivory in archeological digs and seen reference to them in other writings.

They were used as seats of honor for the party guests. Instead of walking around you would drape yourself over these daybeds. Receiving lower ranking guests at your leisure. Drinking and drinking and drinking until you couldn't stand up. And then after simply passing out from drunkenness, you'd already be in bed. You could sleep it off for as long as you wanted. And then wake up for Day Two of the party. These were practical people.

And it's to one of these parties that the leaders of Israel have gone. And while they're partying-heartily with the movers and shakers of the Middle East, Israel as a nation is collapsing. Injustice is rampant. Corruption is the rule. Idolatry and pagan worship are everywhere. And Assyria, their neighbor to the north, is building up for war.

But the leaders of Israel are AWOL. Drinking and partying for days and weeks on end with the very Assyrian leaders who are soon going to invade their own nation and drag them off as prisoners. They are literally sleeping next to the enemy. And no one cares.

They're at the funeral of some nameless leader. And yet, what they should be grieving is the ruin of Joseph. The ruin of God's people by corruption and sin and, ultimately, the day of disaster. God's own wrath and judgment for sin, poured out upon them.

So Amos knows what its like to have ineffective leaders. He knows what it's like to see indifference and apathy rampant in those entrusted with the well-being of the people. He knows what it's like to see a government with a 9% approval rating.

And yet, we have to remember that when Amos talks about the leaders of Israel, he's not just talking about the political realm. He's talking about the spiritual realm as well. In our society, politics and religion are kept firmly separated.

But for Amos, they were one and the same. The government was the church. The church was the government. So if what Amos is saying applies to our political kingdom, does it also apply to our spiritual kingdom? Is Amos maybe not just talking about the government, but about the church as well?

I think sometimes he is. Because I wonder, if God were to fill out a survey about his approval rating of churches in America, would we even get 9%? Would we be ranked below root canals and cockroaches? Would we even be ranked above ebola and meth labs?

I don't know that we would. Because churches can be places of staggering indifference and apathy. They can be places of embarrassing injustice and corruption. And even if we don't see it, the world around us certainly does.

But it's not just the big, headline corruption that I'm talking about, either. It's the little things. The little ways that churches everywhere use money for comfort rather than evangelism. Use man-power for luxury rather than sacrifice. Use God-given opportunities and resources for service to themselves rather than service to God's Kingdom.

It's so pervasive that I honestly don't even know where the line is much of the time. When does a place for Word and Sacrament ministry become a bed of ivory for us to get drunk on? When does providing for our own spiritual support and sustenance become a feast of lamb and fattened calf while the people outside starve to death? When does sincere worship become idle revelry? I don't know.

I don't know because, just like every person in this sanctuary, I'm a sinner too. I'm among those who deserves to be driven from God's kingdom. I'm among those who put far away the day of disaster. I'm among those who brought near the seat of violence.

And I'm among those who with violence and corruption put my Lord to death on the cross. With my sin and my selfishness and my indifference and my apathy. And the ever-present temptation to simply get drunk on sin and luxury and pleasure. I'm among those who tried to put off my own day of disaster by putting it on to Jesus Christ.

Each of us, in our own way, deserve to be the first of those who go into exile. The first of those whom God casts out of his kingdom into the darkness of hell, just like the rich man in Jesus' parable. We deserve it. And yet, Christ took it. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Those are the words of an outcast. An exile. Those are the words of Jesus from the cross. He was rejected so that we might be brought in.

And he gives us a different kind of feast. Amos' feast was drunken revelry that ended in judgment. But Christ's feast is one of mercy and life. At his table there is not the fattened calf, but the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Not bowls of wine, but his own blood poured out for our forgiveness. Not ivory couches of luxury, but the baptismal waters where he wakes us from sin and death and clothes us with his righteousness.

At Amos' feast, guests gorged themselves and ignored the ruin of Joseph. At Christ's feast, sinners are forgiven and raised up to be his living body, sent into the world with hope.

And because of that, the end of the story is not exile. It's homecoming. Not woe, but blessing. Not ruin, but resurrection. On the last day, the same God who once said, "*Woe to those at ease in Zion,*" will say to you, "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*" Not because you earned it. Not because you worked harder. But because Jesus bore the woe, and gives you his well-done.

That is why, for us, the day of disaster becomes the day of salvation. The day of death becomes the day of life. And the feast of judgment becomes the feast of the Lamb in his kingdom, which has no end.

Amos leaves us with warning. A warning we fully deserve. But Christ leaves us with hope and with confidence. Not in leaders, not in ourselves, but in him. He is not fair. He is merciful. He is not indifferent. He is compassionate. And he has not left us in ruin, but raised us up to share in his everlasting kingdom. Amen.