November 8, 2026 – Amos 5:18-24

During college, I had a Physics professor who did something that most students only dream about. You see this man had no interest in being a college professor. No, he had worked in the private sector for his entire career thus far. And he fully intended to go back to the private sector soon. He was only teaching for a year at our tiny, midwestern university to create a bidding war for his services amongst several interested military contractors.

And so on the last day of class, we sat down at our desks prepared to receive a very typical final exam. And instead received a blank sheet of paper with a small note at the top. And it said, "I have a new job. This is the last class I'll probably ever teach. So just write down what grade you want for the quarter and explain why you think you deserve it."

I'm dead serious. That's what it said. And we all just kind of looked at each other wondering, "Is this a joke? Is this some sort of trap?" But no, no... it wasn't a joke. It wasn't a trap. I wrote down that I deserved an "A", and I got an "A." Along with every other student in the class.

We'd all like the world to work that way, wouldn't we? Set your own rules. Give your own grades. Evaluate yourself by your own standards. At school. At work. At home. It'd be wonderful, wouldn't it?

But it doesn't work that way, does it? Every day, we have to play by someone else's rules. Meet someone else's standards. Typically, students must be graded by their teachers. Employees must be evaluated by their bosses. Citizens must be governed by the authorities. We don't always like it. But we grudgingly accept it in virtually every aspect of our lives.

Except, for some reason, when it comes to God. When we're talking about God's rules. God's standards. God's justice and righteousness. Suddenly, we feel like we can invent our own rules. Our own standards. Our own justice and righteousness. And grade ourselves on that basis.

That's what our Old Testament Lesson is getting at today. Amos is a good book. A hard book, but a good one. Talking to God's people at a time when they need... well... a "reformation," to use a modern term. Because they have lost sight of what it means to be the people of God.

They have, like my college physics class, decided to grade themselves based on their own standard. And they have decided that what God wants most is obedience to rituals. He wants them to come to every single required festival. He wants them to make every single required sacrifice. He wants them to sing every single required song. And if they do every single one of these required rituals, then he will reward them.

So that's what they do. And they're good at it. And they decide to give themselves an "A" for keeping all these ceremonies. And surely, when the day of the Lord comes, when the Messiah comes to judge the world, they will be rewarded. He'll punish everyone else. But they will live in paradise.

There's just one little problem: that's not what God actually wants from his people. Yes, festivals and sacrifices and songs can be good. God instituted all these things in Israel's history. They're not bad things. But what matters a lot more to God is the heart of the person doing them.

Proverbs 21:27 says, *"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination."* When a wicked person makes an otherwise good sacrifice to God, that sacrifice becomes an abomination. It becomes disgusting in God's eyes. Revolting. Utterly hateful.

And that is what is going on in Israel. They are wicked people making what should be good sacrifices. Thinking that it will make them good. But all it does is make the sacrifice worthless and disgusting to God.

Which means that when that day of the Lord comes, when God comes to judge the world, they will not be rewarded. They will not live in paradise. It will not be a day of light for them. It will be a day of darkness and gloom.

Because they have tried to escape the lion of God's laws by making their own rules, but they've still run into the grizzly bear of his judgement. They've tried to protect themselves with a wall of their own self-righteous design, but they can't avoid being bitten by the serpent of God's wrath.

What God wants is not hypocrisy and self-righteousness and their own high opinion of themselves. What he wants is real justice rolling like a river through their hearts. Real righteousness that isn't a stream that's here today and dried up tomorrow, but an ever-flowing stream that's present in everything they say and do.

The goodness of a sacrifice is not based on well you perform it. Or how often you do it. Or how perfectly you remember it. The goodness of a sacrifice is based on the goodness of the person doing it.

Which, at first glance, sounds like a pretty nice thing to hear. I just need to be a good person and I don't have anything to worry about. I can do that... can't I?

But then we have to ask ourselves: Does justice really roll through my heart like rushing water? Is righteousness really an ever-flowing stream in my life, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year? Am I really that much better than the Israelites in Amos' day? Or have I just come up with a different standard to judge myself upon?

OK, so you haven't given yourself an "A" based on festivals and sacrifices and songs? But maybe you've given yourself an "A" based on your donations to charity. Or your pristine house and healthy 401k. Or your patriotism for your country. Or your well-behaved children who play 15 sports and still make the honor roll. The list goes on and on.

There are a lot of things in our lives that we take pride in. Things we use to judge ourselves as worthy of God's rewards. Sometimes they're arrogant and corrupt. But sometimes they're very good and decent things. Or, at least, they would be. If it weren't for the fact that *"the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination"* before the Lord.

We are not good people. Which means that we cannot make good sacrifices before the Lord. And that what we're doing here, right now, in this sanctuary, is utterly meaningless on it's own merit. In fact, it's worse than that. It's disgusting. It's an abomination, on it's own.

And yet, we are gathered here today because justice has rolled down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Not in anything we've ever said or done. But in Jesus Christ.

He lived the life of perfect justice that we don't. He lived the life of ever-flowing righteousness, 24/7, 365 days a year, that we can't. And when he went to the cross, it was indeed a day of darkness and gloom, for him. Not us.

Matthew's gospel tells us that for three hours as Jesus hung on the cross, darkness came over the land. And at the moment of his death, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The Temple that was meant to be a place of forgiveness, had become a place of empty ritual. So God shredded it, that we would stop looking to our own goodness for salvation. And start looking to the goodness of his Son, sacrificed for us.

So that we might be given an ever-flowing stream of righteousness, welling-up inside of us to eternal life. So that justice might roll down upon us in the water of Holy Baptism. And those who are born knowing nothing but wickedness, might be justified in God's sight.

So that we who gather here each week, might indeed perform rituals. Not because we believe the rituals themselves makes us good. But because the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives to us his goodness. By our own thoughts, words, and deeds, we are not good people. But by God's power, we are justified and made righteous.

And so the things we do when we gather together here are not an abomination. They are not disgusting in God's eyes. They are accepted and pleasing to him. For it is not the goodness of our work that saves us. But the goodness of the God working in us that saves us.

Working in us. And through us. And around us. Until that great day of the Lord. When the archangel will cry out. When the trumpet will sound. When we will see the light of Christ returning to earth. And the glory of paradise with him will await us forever. Amen.