

What If....?

Amos 8:1-12 Colossians 1:15-20, 2:6-7

July 18, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Amos 8:1-12 [RSV] *This is what the Lord GOD showed me-- a basket of summer fruit. ² He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the LORD said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. ³ The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day," says the Lord GOD; "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!" ⁴ Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵ saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶ buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." ⁷ The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. ⁸ Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? ⁹ On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰ I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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.*

Colossians 1:15-28 [RSV] *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. ²¹ And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him-- ²³ provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. ²⁴ I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. ²⁵ I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in*

you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ *It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

Someone once said there is no such thing as history, only the opinions of historians. In a sense, each of us is a novelist of our own histories – we tell our stories in ways that make certain themes prominent and others obscure. We narrate the past in ways that suit our prejudices. Politicians and journalists call it spin.

On the floor of Parliament Winston Churchill attacked one of then prime minister Stanley Baldwin's policies by declaring, "History will say that the right honorable gentleman was wrong in this matter. I know it will, because I shall write the history."

The urge to reform the past is hard to resist. There are still people about who deny that the holocaust ever happened. Hollywood, of course, has never discovered an event in history that couldn't be made vastly more interesting with a few embellishments. Not a few politicians have been known to burnish their war record (or even invent one) to impress the voters. Even when we desire to create a careful, scientific history our work suffers from too close or too distant a perspective. Which is the real history: is it what the king decided or is it what the people thought; was it what the gospel writers wrote or what Jesus actually did? Herodotus said that writing history was one of the strangest things humans did: it is simultaneously concrete in some ways and indecipherable in others.

Some historians have made a game of playing "what if...?" with the past. The aforementioned Churchill published an article about the American Civil War suggesting that had the Confederate Army won the battle of Gettysburg, World War I might have been averted. Arnold Toynbee published his speculations about what the world would have looked like had Alexander the Great had lived longer.

We can play the game, too. What if Hitler had correctly guessed the Allies landing point on D-Day? What if Mozart and Mendelssohn had not died in their thirties? What if John Kennedy or Martin Luther King had not been assassinated? What if Pilate had pardoned Jesus?

Essayist Cullen Murphy has gotten into the act, too, but he has changed the rules a bit. He plays "what if?" with events that haven't actually happened, but might be really interesting if they did. He writes, "What if Fortune 500 executives had not instituted a voluntary system of stiff salary caps? What if television programming had never been classified as a drug and regulated by the FDA? What if the secession of California from the US had been resisted?" And my favorite: "What if the Pope had not resigned to spend more time with her family?"

The past is difficult territory. In each of our lives there are memories that live on, try as we might to lay them to eternal rest. We can spend enormous amounts of emotional and spiritual energy trying to cage some demon of the past which keeps snapping and biting us. Life is always fired at us point-blank. And there is the problem of the transitory nature of life. "Time like an ever-rolling stream bears all its sons away," we sing in the hymn *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*. Or, as Arthur Guiterman, wrote,

*The tusks that clashed in mighty brawls
Of mastodons, are billiard balls.
The sword of Charlemagne the Just
Is ferric oxide, known as rust.*

*The grizzly bear, whose potent hug
Was feared by all, is now a rug.
Great Caesar's bust is on the shelf,
And I don't feel so well myself.*

History, the prophet Amos insists, is not ultimately our story, but God's story. We find this truth hard to remember, and hard to hold on to, especially at those times when life takes on the character of a washing machine in spin cycle, the centrifugal force throwing us outward and squeezing us dry. The prophet tells us that what redeems each moment, and what redeems us, is not our sweat, or our fear, or even our creative decisions, but God's presence and God's purpose.

Amos proclaims a God whose justice grinds slowly but exceedingly fine. At life's center is a still point, an anchor exerting a powerful hold on the heart and soul of individuals and nations. God's purposes continue even in days that seem turbulent and out of control.

But, of course, when hasn't history been turbulent? Witnessing the often fearful events and trends of the day, each successive generation libels its own time. "It's never been harder to rear children." "Social institutions have never been in more peril." "Politicians have never been so corrupt." "Businesspersons have never been so greedy."

Any time I hear a criticism containing the words *never* or *always* I know I'm listening to someone who knows nothing of history and next to nothing about human nature, which has been depressingly consistent throughout time. And whether today is worse than yesterday or yesterday worse than tomorrow, the only effective antidote to the fear generated by either is to maintain a foothold outside of time, to place our hope and faith in God whose time is eternity and who measures the hours of our lives with grace.

The prophet Amos and the Apostle Paul lived in different, but equally tumultuous, times. In Amos' day things were fat and gone to seed: the Jerusalem stock market was setting new records, foreign trade was up, life was good. But it was a time of unparalleled social corruption, political chicanery, and unethical business practices.

Paul was born, lived, and died in the midst of catastrophic upheaval. The cohesiveness of Jewish society was under assault by cultural, religious, political, and economic forces. Not the least of these was the oppression of Rome against which Jews rebelled, ultimately resulting in the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.

Through it all, Amos and Paul insisted that it was not the chaos that defined the times but that which remained consistently true and absolutely dependable: God was in charge. In announcing God's judgment, Amos was insisting that time and history are moral issues, and that it matters how one lives. He argues that there is a God at the center of things, a God of justice, who is involved in human history and cares about its outcomes.

This flies in the face of our assumptions about time, that it somehow belongs to us, that it is ours to define and ours to waste. After all, we make the rules, we build the clocks, we call "time out!"

But, of course, time is never suspended. The law of unanticipated consequences is always enforced. This little selfish choice leads to that now-somewhat-larger-than-expected result. The past's decision to pollute a river becomes the future's clean-up

effort. Today's deferral of dealing with a habit becomes tomorrow's problem with addiction. This is automatic and linear, of course, but the point that Amos is making is we never get away with thinking small and selfish about time and what we do in it. As a friend of mine is fond of saying, "Nothing predicts behavior like behavior." And so much of our unhappiness and frustration is not knowing what to do and how to act, but choosing to not do or act that way "this time" because we think it won't, just this once, matter.

In today's moral geography we think we can act as though we were islands of self-centeredness, archipelagoes of individual choice and concerns. Amos redrew the map so that the border which had gerrymandered the privileged into enclaves of self-concern became lines of accountability between persons, and between persons and God.

What if, Amos said, this is a moral universe? What if there is a God who cares how we treat one another? If so, then what happens if everyone keeps living for themselves? What if God actually cares how we spend the time we have been given and it matters how we use the wealth we have?

What if there are profound consequences beyond market trends and economic indices and balance of trade deficits? What if nothing is value-neutral and we really will be held accountable for what we think, say, and do? And, what if we will not only be judged based on our personal, individual decisions, but those of the whole community, as well? Well, then, Amos says, it's a whole new ballgame, isn't it?

But, what if, also, there is a center that holds secure, a still point that does not waver, wobble, or spin in frenzy with the rest of the world? What if at the periphery of life is God's love and at the center of life is Christ in whom, as Paul puts it, "all things hold together?" Then, it seems to me, we have been given a theme by which to organize and pacify our lives. If there is a center which holds, then there is a point toward which we can grow that gives our lives, our times, our energies and devotions a theme.

Amos was trying to tell the people of that day that they only made their own lives, the lives of those around them, and the lives of people yet unborn far more painful and perplexing when they made the theme of their lives getting and having instead of giving and serving. And Paul exhorted the people of his time to understand that they futilely worked against the grain of God's design if they didn't understand that Christ – his justice, his mercy, his hope, his love – was the organizing principle through which the world was created. What if the still point at the center of your life was Christ?

This kind of life would look like what Abraham Joshua Heschel said was needful: "...to search in the wilderness of wellsprings of devotion, for treasures of stillness, for the power of love and care for humankind. What is urgently needed are ways of helping one another in the terrible predicament of here and now by the courage to believe the word of the Lord endures forever...; to cooperate in trying to bring about a resurrection of sensitivity, a revival of conscience; to keep alive the divine sparks in our souls..., and faithfulness to the Living God."