

SPRING SUMMER FALL THEME: “GROWING IN GOD”

Phase Two: “**Growing in God: Recovering**” (Aug. 1-Sept. 26)

Devotional Reading by Kevin McCabe

Relevant Scriptures: Amos 3:13-15; 5:10-12; 6:4-7.

For an Old Testament prophet like Amos the radical upheavals of the last ten years would be evidence that God is coming to judge the nations. Unprecedented droughts, famines, wildfires, locusts, and plagues have truly reached Biblical proportions. Moreover, direct human activities such as wars, government oppression, radical economic inequities, political corruption, and the manipulation of information have also reached levels beyond anything that we in the West are accustomed to. Nowadays, we are wary of referring to the “End Times” or the “Day of the Lord”, but circumstances are likely to make most people a little bit nervous.

As we enter into the theme of “Growing in God: Recovery” we may well ask what we are recovering from, and how are we to go about it. In this meditation I will be highlighting recent impacts on the environment and their economic and political aspects. Amos seems to be a useful guide to things spinning out of control, even though the official line may still be, “Don’t Worry—Be Happy”. Following the lead of some recent sermons and devotions, I will try to build on suggestions for how to respond to injustice while also growing in God.

Some fifteen years ago I was standing near the edge of the Niagara Escarpment, looking down over the city of St. Catharines. I noticed that there was a substantial canopy of trees. There were also larger snatches of green space, such as Burgoyne Woods and along 12-Mile Creek. It struck me then, that given current world conditions, this was a very unusual sight. Most of the world today is suffering from a deficit of trees, as well as those birds and other animals which they shelter. Much of Europe, Central Asia, the Far East, South-East Asia, India, the Near East, northern Africa, and, very rapidly, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America are being denuded of trees.

It requires some explanation then why North America, on the whole, retains a substantial tree cover. One reason for this might be that “New World” has not been subjected to thousands of years of extensive agriculture and urbanization in the manner of the “Old World”. It is also true that the comparative wealth of North America provides the wherewithal to establish and maintain trees according to wants and needs. Another reason is Romanticism, a philosophy of the 18th and 19th

centuries, which believed that what is natural is best, and that human beings should “follow nature”. Influential writers and poets, including Rousseau, Wordsworth, Emerson, and their followers, inculcated the idea that supreme wisdom and joy lay in being at one with nature.

This movement promoted the founding of natural parks and nature preserves, reforestation, and reverence for natural wonders. However, Romanticism has ceased to be a driving force in the contemporary world, and has been largely replaced by aggressive forms of capitalism and Marxism. These economic ideologies aim at large-scale practical material results, especially in matters of industrial and agricultural production. Indeed, if I now were to look down on St. Catharines fifteen years later, I would probably notice a spike in high-rise apartments and condos, more paved-over areas, larger houses, and fewer trees.

Capitalism began with the concept of “economic man”, that is, the idea that human happiness is chiefly about overcoming obstacles in order to amass wealth and enjoy its benefits. Daniel Defoe’s character Robinson Crusoe is an example of this. He survives a shipwreck, and is able to salvage the ship’s contents, and eventually returns to England as a relatively wealthy man. Such success, even today, is often equated with God’s favour. Internet gurus will instruct you on “How to Make a Million in the Stock Market and Still Go to Heaven”. More prosaic writers will advise you how to make a million and stay out of jail.

We naturally think of acquiring wealth in terms of the contemporary situation, but nearly all developed cultures and civilizations have experienced similar phases. Before it fell to the Assyrians, the Kingdom of Israel experienced an “Indian Summer” of prosperity under Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.) Sometimes people come to believe that these relatively stable periods will continue for ever.

The prophet Amos was one who condemned the schemes and commercial tricks which frequently appear to be part of the accumulation of wealth. Among other things, Amos attacks the tendency to build increasingly larger and more expensive houses (3:13-15):

“Hear, and testify, against the house of Jacob”
says the Lord God, the God of hosts,
that on the day I punish Israel for his transgression...
I will smite the winter house with the summer house;
and the houses of ivory shall perish,
and the great houses shall come to an end,” says the Lord.

There seems, at all times and places, attempts by the very rich and powerful to expand and protect their property and position, including through dubious legal and political means. This not only involves maintaining the status quo, but forming alliances among church, state, and the military. Amos condemns the establishment for silencing its critics, and for its hostility towards those who practice morality and godliness (5:10-12):

They hate him who reproveth in the gate,
and they abhor him who speaks the truth.
Therefore because you trample upon the poor
and take from him exactions of wheat,
You have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not dwell in them,
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine
for I know how many are your transgressions...

It is usually assumed that the “life-styles of the rich and famous” consist of luxurious living. The process now called “conspicuous consumption” takes a heavy toll of the world’s resources, but it also frequently reflects a society with marked economic disparities. In the ancient world, poorer farmers and herdsman were obliged to move into marginal lands, where they and their herds eventually deforested the slopes and stripped the ground cover, leading to erosion and “badlands”. This process was well advanced all around the Mediterranean Basin by the end of the Roman Empire.

To return to the present day, we learn that the top 1% of Americans possess as much wealth as the lowest 90% of Americans. Worldwide, an [Oxfam](#) study (2017) found that only eight people, six of them Americans, own as much combined wealth as half the human race. And the gap between the rich and poor is rapidly increasing. The super-rich and powerful, through agencies such as the World Bank, can manipulate the world economy to their advantage.

If we ask why there is no substantial action on climate change, deforestation, ecological disasters, generational poverty, and even pandemics, it is largely because such measures might well lead to higher taxes, as well as reduced profits and incomes. So, a leading factor in the degradation of the environment is greed, or miserliness. We might call this the “Ebenezer Scrooge” Effect, or the “What’s In It For Me?” Effect.

It is, therefore, tempting to think of a relatively few “baddies” making this world a difficult and dangerous place for everybody else. And this may be true as far as it

goes. But these “few baddies” represent large cultural and political blocks where the sway of big money and aggressive political power are largely accepted as a given. (I remember an interview with a New York City homeless man, who fully supported the “American Dream”. He believed in his chances of winning the lottery, and joining the millionaires’ club. And there are 37,000 millionaires in New York City.) In fact, these prominent wealthy individuals are only the tip of the iceberg, and, if they were to go, they would likely be replaced by others, who would behave in a similar fashion.

Next to good old-fashioned greed, a second factor is “tunnel vision”. That is, organizations and interest groups are so intent on their own agenda that “collateral damage” is rarely a matter of concern. A friend of mine blew the whistle on international wildlife agencies which were co-operating with third-world dictators in order to protect endangered wildlife. They were paying these governments to move tribal peoples out of environmentally-sensitive areas. The army would be sent in, ostensibly to move the tribes elsewhere. What usually happened was that the tribal peoples would resist, and a general massacre ensued. Thus, it appears that our non-profit and charitable organizations are not always on the side of the angels, but allow tunnel vision to blur the big picture.

Related to tunnel vision is the political agenda of super-powers, such as Russia, China, and the United States. These nations normally work in opposition to the others, rather like the various Christian denominations on an Indian Reserve. Indeed, the great powers usually engage in situations which provide a strategic advantage for them. Thus, ordinary day-to-day help for impoverished countries is not a priority. In the same way, national governments regularly favour their supporters and allies over citizens who are merely in desperate need.

Besides greed, tunnel vision, and the political agenda, a fourth factor is general ignorance or lack of awareness. Nearly all of the most impoverished countries of the world are located in Africa south of the Sahara. It is not surprising that, in these nations, the rates of deforestation and animal depletion are among the highest in the world. Very poor people are in need of fuel and food on a daily basis, and neither their own governments nor international agencies are likely to provide adequate resources for survival.

At one time it was said that international news services only employed four full-time reporters in sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast, about the same time, there were over thirty reporters camped outside Britney Spears’ home, waiting for the singer to appear. Thus, events which resulted in thousands of deaths in Africa were unlikely to be reported at all, or to only receive passing mention.

Well, the big picture looks rather bleak, doesn't it?

I am reminded of the time when Mother Teresa was in Lebanon after a bombing. She was helping to carry a child out of the rubble. Meanwhile, a reporter was standing nearby. He said to her, "There are children dying all over the place. Why are you taking so much trouble with this one child?" She replied, "I believe that God wants me to save this child". We too can believe that God wants us to save this baby, this family, this person, this woodlot, this creek, this bird, or even this flower.

My friend made himself very unpopular by blowing the whistle on prestigious animal welfare agencies. However, that kind of open co-operation between such agencies and military dictators largely ceased. As Pastor Waldo taught us several weeks ago, and, as the prophet Amos demonstrated, telling the truth to power is often necessary, even if it is dangerous.

The American poet James Russell Lowell also commented on the on-going need to stand up for justice in the following lines:

Think not there is one Calvary alone.
Nor say the soul of truth but once can die.
In every age the mob cries, "Crucify!"
In every age the Pharisees are known.
Who speaks for truth must plead to hearts of stone.
Who fights for truth must face the cynic lie,
Must know the martyr's fiery agony
In every age, till wrong is overthrown.

There is also a need to pray about the many messy situations in the world today. It is a difficult period worldwide for oceans, rivers, marine animals, forests, jungles, grasslands, birds, and all living things. Fortunately, we have a long Christian tradition of prayer for God's creation. We can daily raise such concerns with our Father in Heaven who created the totality of nature. In addition to some well-known patron saints of the natural world, such as St. Francis of Assisi and St. Anthony of Padua, there are hundreds of Christians who have raised their voices in praise of creation and with concern for its degradation. I will close with several examples of prayers for our planet.

Although Saint Basil the Great was noted for his asceticism (he founded several monasteries), and his sturdy opposition to Arian theology in the 4th Century, he demonstrated considerable sensitivity to the natural world. In the *Hexaëmeron* ("Six Days"), nine [Lenten](#) sermons on the days of the Creation, Basil speaks of the varied

beauty of the world as reflecting the splendour of God. Possibly, the prayer which follows was taken from this work:

O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of man with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us alone but for themselves and for thee, and that they love the sweetness of life.

Another friend to creation was the distinguished theologian, physician and organist Albert Schweitzer who is best known for his humanitarian work in the Congo during the mid-20th Century. I will conclude with his prayer for the animals of the world:

Hear our humble prayer, O God, for our friends the animals, especially for animals who are suffering; for any that are hunted or lost or deserted or frightened or hungry; for all that must be put to death. We entreat for them all thy mercy and pity and for those who deal with them we ask a heart of compassion, gentle hands and kindly words. Make us ourselves to be true friends to animals and so to share the blessing of the merciful.