

**Installation of Kathryn Lohre as President of the
National Council of Churches in Christ
Lutheran Center Chapel
Chicago, Illinois
November 9, 2011**

Amos 5:18-24
Matthew 25:1-13

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

“[L]et justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

(Amos 5:24 NRSV) There they are, the words that stir us. They are the heart of the passage from Amos, right? Kathryn, I suspect it is because of that verse you expressed relief when I told you that I was preaching on the Amos text and not the reading from Matthew. (Laughter)

“[L]et justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

(Amos 5:24 NRSV) Oh, my, how many of you have preached or heard eloquent, passionate, prophetic sermons on that verse? In fact, just hearing those words again today may make it hard for some of you to sit still. Pretty soon, if not already, you will be tempted to jump up and ask this preacher to step aside because the Holy Spirit is stirring in your soul and you have a word from the Lord for us today.

Oh yes, especially this week after reports of escalating rates of poverty in this land, allegations of child abuse dominating the airwaves, global warming is being deemed so soon irreversible, Arab Spring has led to volatility and uncertainty. So we cry out “[L]et justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!” (Amos 5:24 NRSV)

But friends if we go there right away, will we have skipped over, slipped by, those harder, even harsher words we need to hear and ponder, but seek to avoid? Those words
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about “The day of the Lord.” Did you hear them? “Alas, for you who desire the day of the Lord.” May I see a show of hands please? Does anyone here desire the day of the Lord? If not, why are you here? Well, for Kathryn Lohre’s installation is a good answer, but finally not a reason to avoid the day of the Lord.

Yet maybe we have a good reason not to raise our hands, not to desire the day of the Lord. For did you hear Amos? “Why do you want the day of the Lord? Is not the day of the Lord darkness not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” (Amos 5:18-20, NRSV) Could it be we prefer to skip over that part of Amos and get to the “justice rolling down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” because we know, oh yes we do know, that the day of God’s arrival will include judgment.

We can live with judgment as long as we are consulted by God about who deserves to hear it, not only hear it, but receive the full weight of God’s judgment. Come on now, we have such clarity, don’t we? Those deserving God’s judgment are all those who are damming up God’s justice rolling waters, all those who by their oppressive economic systems, by their repressive regimes and by their racist and sexist privileged lives are diverting those ever-flowing streams of righteousness, preventing them from washing over everyone and not just the privileged few. Oh yes, Lord, let your day come and bring down your judgment upon all who deserve it.

Well, I am sorry to break the news, or at least be the one to remind you of what you already know, that God’s judgment is universal. It is upon all of us. All those words from Yahweh/Isaiah—I hate, despise, loathe, I refuse your whatever. For we take God’s words of judgment as fuel for (often petty) feuds over contemporary vs. traditional worship, or justice churches vs. Jesus churches or personal piety vs. public witness.

But these words are about the relationship between God and Israel, God and God's people. And God is not pleased. In this consumer-driven, competitive religious marketplace when we are all trying to find our niche to get and hold our market share of members, I wonder just how we are portraying the day of the Lord?

How do we answer Amos' question, "Why do you want the day of the Lord?" It is understandable that we want the day of the Lord to be about us, resolving our tensions, healing our wounds, absolving my guilt.

Come on now. It is understandable why we want the day of the Lord—every Lord's day when we gather to be about us, about our festivals, our offerings, our denominational identities, our worship attendance, our beautiful cathedrals on the National Register of Historic Places, our Grammy-award deserving praise bands and our eloquent preaching.

Watch out, for Amos is about to disappoint you. He is clear [that] the day of the Lord is not your or my shining moment. The Lord's day is darkness because the Lord works in the dark. When the Lord's day comes, it will be darkness. So now that we are paying attention to whose day the Lord's day is, then perhaps we can see what the Lord is doing in the dark. Yahweh works in the dark.

The beginning of creation? In the dark.

The first Passover in Egypt? In the dark.

Yes, the end of slavery, the beginning of the journey from captivity into the wilderness to freedom to living in and by God's promises? In the dark.

And those to whom Jesus went, whose lives were overshadowed by disease, shuttered by others' hatreds and fears, even Lazarus shut in the dark grave of death. Yes, for those who lived in darkness, Jesus brought an end and a new beginning.

Jesus' last Passover supper with the disciples? In the dark.

Jesus' lonely prayer and arrest in Gethsemane? In the dark.

His sham trial and torture? In the dark.

Jesus' death on the cross? In the darkness that covered the land, even at midday.

Yes as Jesus lay in the dark grave where you and I will go someday, God, who works in those places, restored Jesus to life.

We have good news today. God continues to work in the dark, in the secret places of your imagination and memory and desire, places too dark even for you to see or explore. There God is raising you to new life; God planting the promise of Christ's life deeply into your life's story so that just as Jesus lay in the tomb, the seed of God's promise has become buried in you, your memory, your consciousness, your hope, your faith, until the day comes. The Lord's day.

Oh yes, God is at work where fear of the other drives us to erect walls that become barriers of exclusion, keeping those of other faiths isolated and unknown, where our fear of the other drives the migrant without documentation to live in the shadows, haunted by fears of deportation and separation. Yet there God is at work in the dark, reconciling and restoring community that can happen only by the power of the liberating spirit that only God can accomplish—the new creation in Christ, a new day, the Lord's Day, when having died with Christ, we now live in Christ.

“[L]et justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”
(AMOS 5:24 NRSV) Friends, what if that verse on which we love and long to preach is not first the prophet's exhortation for what we should be doing, but is God's clear word

of promise for what God is and will be doing? Then the question is not, “Will justice and righteousness happen?” but will it stop happening?

Do not misunderstand—it is certainly appropriate for us to challenge one another and all with whom we serve to go with the flow, the flood of God’s merciful justice in the world, ride with the tide of God’s setting the world right in Christ bathed in its cleansing power. But I am here to tell you that God’s promise of justice and righteousness will flow like refreshing water from the highest mountains. It will flow abundantly through you and me, through us joined together, flowing into the life of the world just as surely as the life of Jesus will flow and roll with the bread and wine into your body now.

Oh yes, God [is] in our lives, in this place, in the National Council of Churches in Christ, in the world. Oh God pour down your justice like waters, let your righteousness roll like an everflowing stream. Oh yes, pour it down, Lord, and let it roll, let it roll, let it roll.

Amen.