



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 17, 2006
The Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete)

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin

on
Amos 9:11-15
John 3:22-30

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PURSUED BY AMOS

The plowman shall overtake the reaper. —Amos 9:13

The book of the prophet Amos ends with the passage you heard this evening, and one might say it ends not a minute too soon. Amos is not the fellow you look forward to meeting at a cocktail party. “Nice party, isn’t it, Amos,” you say; and he says, “Thus saith the Lord: For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.” You clear your throat, and attempt a smile, and he says, “Do two walk together, unless they have made an appointment? Does a lion roar in the forest, when he has no prey? Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?” “Weeellllll,” you say, your eyes scanning the room for an escape, and you reach back for the support of the wall, and he moves in close, right in your face: “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! It is as if a man went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.” You snap yourself away from the wall, and push yourself through the crowd, trying to leave the room, and he shouts after you: “Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” Yes, tonight the book is over, “at last,” we think, “and good riddance.”

But Amos was a true prophet of the Lord, and whatever difficulty we may have with his message, whatever the cantankerous crabbiness of his personality, he was still a true prophet. A message from God is never a message without hope. Amos goes on for eight chapters, and for nine, and then we hear . . .

. . . decayed and damaged structures will be rebuilt; nations will be reconciled with the house of David in the center; the people’s fortunes will be restored; there will be peace and continuity, so that the people who plant the grapes will still be around to drink the wine . . . all of which are comforting, and usual, images of hope. They are images of a future time. But with them comes a twist. Hear it again: *the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes [shall overtake] him who sows the seed*. With these two startling images Amos shows his theological genius. They are not images of a future where broken things are fixed and sad things are replaced by joy: rather, they are impossible images! How can the plowman overtake the reaper? You reap after you plow! The image is that the harvest will come so quickly, that the crop will be so blessed, that it won’t even need to be sowed, that the reaper will be hauling off great sheaves even before the seed is placed in the ground! And Amos doubles the image, in reverse, to the same effect: the treader of grapes will overtake the vine-planter, so that we will have wine even before the grape seed is planted!

As T. S. Eliot almost said, the end comes before the beginning.

When I think of the week that is ahead of us, the third week of what should be a four-week season of Advent, but which is this year cruelly fore-shortened by the calendar, so that but one week and seven hours from now it will be Christmas, when I think of presents yet to be wrapped and cards not yet written and menus not yet planned—not to mention services not yet sung and even sermons not yet written; when I think of thousands of travels about to be squeezed in and tons of luggage circling on conveyor belts: I picture myself as a small quaking figure in swim trunks, crouched on top of a beach board that I'm clutching, and it's moving very fast, and behind me, now reaching way over me, is a great wave of the ocean. The wave which ought to be behind us has come up and wrapped around us, and thus the future has overtaken the present.

We err if we think of the end as something we await in the future, as if it will be just one more event added to the sequence of events. While Jesus' coming to judge the world is truly an event in our world's future, and while it will be indeed a historical event, it will not be and is not simply such. It is an impingement of the timeless upon time, a revolution that irrupts within the quotidian world. Amos grasps truthfully when he says that when the day of the Lord comes the fruit of our labors will run in advance of any laboring—as in a sense Christmas will be here before we prepare for it. That day of the Lord is the kingdom of God of which Jesus said it is at hand. It is at hand because the timeless has irrupted within time. And so there is no need for any anxiety about the future, no need to be anxious about those cards not written, those presents not wrapped, those menus uncooked: fear not, little flock, for there is nothing in the future, of value, that is not already here in the present.

How do we hold together the Amos who warns of judgment (the Amos who trapped us at the cocktail party) with the Amos of hope (the Amos of the future which overtakes the present)? An image, perhaps, is given in that strange scene in the third chapter of John's gospel. We left John the Baptist behind in chapter one, when he pointed his followers to go after Jesus and indeed they went. But now, suddenly, we are made aware that John the Baptist is still there, and he is still baptizing, still calling people to repent of their sins. What's going on? On the one hand is Jesus with his disciples, his teaching, the kingdom of God at hand; and on the other, John Baptist, his disciples, his teaching of repentance. We see them, for these few verses, in split-screen parallel action. John Baptist interprets that he is the friend of the bridegroom, and that his role is to point to the groom, and to diminish (although obviously not to disappear, not, at least, until he has said this). There is an ongoing validity to the summons to integrity of life, to fidelity to God, to repentance. But at the same time something new has happened, there is a novel action afoot in this unsuspecting world. An unseen child grows in the darkness of a womb, and seekers of wisdom stoop to find him, and political powers intuit that the ground on which they stand has already passed away. For eternity is bursting into time, and the settled presumptions, the mercantile calculations of past and future are being destroyed. And that is our hope: not that someday we will be ready when he comes, but that his future coming has already overtaken our present. Amos saw it exactly: *the plowman shall overtake the reaper*; indeed, the kingdom of God is at hand.