

Advent Devotional December 14, 2023

Scripture

Amos 9:1-10

*1 I saw the LORD standing beside the altar, and he said:
Strike the capitals until the thresholds shake,
and shatter them on the heads of all the people;
and those who are left I will kill with the sword;
not one of them shall flee away,
not one of them shall escape.*

*2 Though they dig into Sheol,
from there shall my hand take them;
though they climb up to heaven,
from there I will bring them down.*

*3 Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel,
from there I will search out and take them;
and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea,
there I will command the sea-serpent, and it shall bite them.*

*4 And though they go into captivity in front of their enemies,
there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them;
and I will fix my eyes on them
for harm and not for good.*

*5 The Lord, GOD of hosts,
he who touches the earth and it melts,
and all who live in it mourn,
and all of it rises like the Nile,
and sinks again, like the Nile of Egypt;
6 who builds his upper chambers in the heavens,
and founds his vault upon the earth;
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out upon the surface of the earth
the LORD is his name.*

*7 Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the LORD.
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?*

*8 The eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom,
and I will destroy it from the face of the earth
except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,
says the LORD.*

*9 For lo, I will command,
and shake the house of Israel among all the nations
as one shakes with a sieve,
but no pebble shall fall to the ground.*

10 All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword,

who say, "Evil shall not overtake or meet us."

Devotion

The Rev. Dr. Edwin Chr. van Driel, Directors' Bicentennial Professor of Theology

Amidst all the eschatological and apocalyptic imagery that the Advent lectionary during these weeks selects from the Scriptures, today's readings draw particularly on the violent power of nature. One of the assigned psalms speaks of smoke and devouring fire, thundering, lightning, hailstones, and coals of fire (Ps 18). The other one references snow like wool, frost scattered like ashes, blowing wind, and flowing waters (Ps 147). The Amos text above references the mourning that the destructive powers of nature cause on the earth (vv. 5-6).

After the last few summers, I wonder if for many of us these images start to feel less and less as the vivid metaphors we once took them to be, and more and more as frightening, menacing realities. Language that speaks of the melting of the earth suddenly does not seem poetic license, but a real possibility.

If this is the case, and if this kind of scriptural imagery may be more realistic than we even thought or feared, these texts also give us a word of consolation. They tell us that even if God's justice delivers us up to the terrible consequences of our own destructive behavior, we nonetheless will not fall out of the hands of the living God. The melting glaciers, the rising waters—they are not the result of random, unimpeded, unrestrained forces. In all their violence these powers still come forth out of God's vaults and upper chambers. We are still in the hands of one we know by name. We are still held by the one who says that as "his eyes are upon the sinful kingdom, and he will destroy it from the face of the earth, he nonetheless will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob" (v. 8).

Prayer

God of hosts, who has given us to know you by name, even as the waters rise and sink, and as you touch the earth and it melts, we entrust ourselves to you, knowing that you will be true to your promises of forgiveness, and salvation, and life. Amen.