

**Symposium – “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters”: The Role of Spirituality in African
American Environmental Activism in the US South**

A Meditation on Justice: Amos 5:24

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“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty and ever-flowing stream.” These words, penned by the prophet Amos in the fifth chapter of his book, have served as a clarion call for the world’s unjust to become just. Amos speaks these words on behalf of God to a society riddled with disparity between the rich and the poor. Albeit a fairly simplistic theology, popular thought for the time was that your status was a barometer of your spiritual health. Riches were a sign of righteousness and struggle was a scarlet letter of sin. Fancy chariots and big homes were evidence of God’s divine favor and your own righteous living. What their theology lacked, however, was the recognition that every blessing comes with its own measure of responsibility. A requirement to remain faithful to God and responsible for one another. Simply put – to whom much is given, much is required.

So, it is here that we find a wealthy class who lacked moral conscience and spiritual character. They continuously denied the poor their natural and material resources and reduced their own spiritual expression to superficial pomp and circumstance. Their blessings were, at best, an unequal trade. Deep pockets for a shallow faith. And God had enough. Speaking through Amos in

verses 11 and 12: “Because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from ... [them], 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 and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate.”

I can hear the disappointment pour from the very heart of God. Angered that social and economic advancement led to the people’s apathy. The wealthy minority – the 1% – had thrived by over-working and underpaying the poor and charging them excessively for meager housing on the least desirable land, leaving them with very little to feed their families. What food they could scrape together lacked the nutritional benefits needed for optimal health. This structure guaranteed only that the rich would get richer while the poor remained stagnant if not increasingly poorer. See, theirs was an interlocking system of oppression intricately weaving together the complexities of economics, politics, natural resources, and religion.

These “upper echelon-ers” had gone through the ritual motions of their faith. Giving offerings and attending services only to be found later dealing unfairly with the poor. Their faith had no real root in the things that pleased God nor did it compel them into right relationship with one another. They were ones who cut corners, made dirty deals, overrode court decisions all to suit their own needs. It was these corner-cutting efforts that resulted in contaminated water supplies, cancer-causing towers near schools, pipelines through sacred lands, and diminished air quality in low-income areas. They were the people who called on God to bless their land while they ordered the destruction of another’s. These people placed personal gain and selfish ambition over their communal responsibility to care for the world and for one another.

We know all-too-well the woes of Amos because his community serves as a mirror of our own. Saturated with greed and corruption, leveled by the imbalanced scales of injustice. A reality that African Americans have known and endured for entirely too long. We have worn our resilience as a badge of honor as we’ve taken scraps and made soul-food, turned our laments into gospel melodies and road maps to freedom. Took our brokenness and made the blues, transformed our pain into poetry, combined our brilliance and economic genius and created the mathematical formula for how to make a dollar out of 15 cents, bottled our tears and repurposed its salt so that our struggles didn’t steal our flavor. That type of resilience does not come from our bodies. That

type of resilience comes from what W.E.B. DuBois called “The Souls of Black Folk”. Grounded in the double-consciousness of our existence as both African and American yet not fully accepted as either at the same time. Girded by the esoteric wisdom of our ancestors passed down through generations of oral tradition and spiritual osmosis.

Even the birth of the Black church couldn’t escape the spiritual fortitude of our heritage. The Black church was born out of the darkness of slavery, under the auspice of colonialism. The slave masters gave us the theological writings of Peter and Paul who said, “slaves obey your masters”, and we reminded them of the *God* who said, “let My people go”.

I recently saw the movie *Black Panther*. One of the things I loved about it was that when there was a challenge for the throne, the current king drank from the heart-shaped herb to remove his super powers so that the two could fight as equals on an even playing field. That sense of equality is what activists and advocates have been demanding for centuries. It’s what Amos is speaking about in Chapter 5. Justice. A fair chance. We have grown accustomed to putting the cart before the horse. Wanting to assess achievement without considering the environment. Such lofty conversations allow us to think we are further along than we really are. And so, we find ourselves: the activists, the poor, the disenfranchised, the underdog siding with the voice of God through Amos at the end of Chapter 5, saying:

I have grown tired of your self-gratifying expressions of care, and I can no longer accept the dangling carrot you’ve placed just out of our reach. Don’t sing with me that we shall overcome if you are unwilling to relinquish any measure of your privilege so that I might have some. I don’t need your empty overtures, I just need justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty and ever-flowing stream!