

When God Speaks, Do People Listen?

by Kaely Miller

FAITH STORY:

Amos 3

FAITH FOCUS:

God calls the entire nation of Israel to hear his declaration of punishment for all of their iniquities. Israel is the only family, out of all the other families on earth, that God has known.

Amos then begins to prophesy to the people. Using different illustrations, he says that just as one thing is dependent upon another (for example, a trap doesn't spring if nothing is in it), in the same way, the prophet's speaking is based on God speaking to him first.

Amos calls Ashdod and Egypt to be witnesses of Israel's injustices. He points to Samaria and to the oppressions within. God declares that the people do not know how to do right, that they store up material wealth through violence and robbery. Therefore, God announces that an enemy will surround the land, strip it of the Israelites' defense, and all the strongholds will be plundered. In the same way that a shepherd rescues from the lion's mouth two legs or an ear of a sheep, so will the Israelites who live in Samaria be rescued, with a corner of a couch and part of a bed. On the day that God punishes Israel for its transgressions, he will also punish the altars of Bethel. Its horns will be cut off and they will fall to the ground. He will tear down the winter and summer houses, along with the houses of ivory and the great houses.

SESSION GOAL:

To help the students recognize a God of love in all forms, even a God who judges and punishes; and to aid the students in discovering what it looks like to hear God as they are.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Articulate what chosen-ness means
- Voice what God's relationship was with Israel
- Verbalize what God is saying to them personally
- Identify the nature of their response to hearing God

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- Bibles
- Note cards with different roles written on them—one card for each student. Examples of roles you could include: church elder, father, mother, pastor, youth group sponsor, famous actor, famous athlete, farmer, motorcycle rider, foreign exchange student, high school music teacher, hairdresser, shoe sales person, doctor, cowboy.
- Papers and pens
- White board with questions from Explore the Bible written on it.
- Pictures of people displaying various emotions for option 1 in Apply/Respond.
- Large newsprint and markers for option 2 in Apply/Respond
- Copies of the skit
- Prizes for the Focus activity

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS:

Check in with the students as they arrive. Begin the session by asking them what roles they have played throughout the week. (student, son/daughter, friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, soccer player, band member, etc.) Ask: *Are there ever times when you're not sure about your role or how to act within that role?* Discuss their answers. For example, *are you ever confused as a boyfriend whether to spend time with your girlfriend or the guys? Or, athletes, do you ever struggle with whether to put more time into your athletics or your academics? Are you ever frustrated in your role as a son or daughter?*

Hand out the note cards, one per student. Instruct students to keep what's written on their card a secret until they are paired up. Pair up the students, and explain that the goal of this activity is to figure out what role they are. Their role is what is written on their partner's note card, and their partner will need to act it out in order for them to guess it. This is similar to charades, with one partner acting out the other's role. No talking, no noises, no writing, no pointing. The only people who are allowed to be talking are those who are guessing their roles, and even then they are allowed only to voice their guesses, not questions to be answered by the "actor." The first three people who have guessed their role correctly will be given a prize. Make the prizes enticing so that the youth will be motivated to guess their roles quickly.

If the youth are motivated, this activity should be somewhat of a struggle between the partners. Since only three individuals can win the prizes, each person will want to guess his/her own role instead of helping the other partner guess. After the first three people have

guessed their role and won a prize, have everyone sit down.

CONNECT:

Take some time to discuss the following questions:

- *Was it difficult to guess your roles? Why?*
- *Was it hard to focus on helping your partner guess when you were wanting to know what your role was?*
- *What are other situations when it's hard to focus, especially when you're not certain what your role is?*
- *Why is it easier to focus when you know what your certain role or responsibility is?*

Transition Statement: *Sometimes it's hard to focus when we don't know what our role is in a certain group or event. This happened to the Israelites. They found it hard to listen to God when they forgot what their role among the nations was, and when they forgot who God had called them to be. Let's look at how Amos, a prophet, declared God's judgment to the Israelites when they forgot what it meant to be a chosen nation.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE:

Begin this time by reading the Amos passage in whatever format works best with your group. Then have the skit acted out. You may want to choose the four people who will be the actors ahead of time, so that they are prepared to do the skit.

After the skit, break into small groups. Give each of the groups a Bible and paper on which to answer the following questions. These questions should be on a white board that all groups can see.

- *What stuck out at you the most from this skit?*
- *What was the nature of God? How did God act toward Israel?*
In deep grief, like a loving parent.
- *What was the nature of Amos? Did he want to prophesy to Israel? Why do you think he did then?*
He had to, just like a lion has to roar.
- *What was the nature of Israel? Why do you think Israel didn't hear God?*
They thought they were God's favorites and didn't need to listen to God.
- *What from the passage seems to have prevented the Israelites from listening?*

After all of the groups are finished discussing, come back together as a large group. Have each group share their responses to the questions. Then discuss these questions in the larger group:

- *What was the main issue or problem with Israel?*
She wasn't hearing or listening to either God or Amos.
- *How do we know this was the main issue? What is the very first thing God calls Israel to do?*
To hear (v.1).
- *What kind of relationship did God have with Israel?*
The people of Israel were supposed to hear God, to listen to him, precisely because of the the relationship between them. Notice that God uses known (v.2) to describe his relationship with the Israelites. To know someone in the ancient culture was a very intimate thing - it pointed to a relationship shared only among the closest of people, such as a husband and wife.
- *Why does God address Israel like he does (v.1-2)?*
God reminds the Israelites that he delivered the entire family - the entire people of Abraham - from Egypt. He showed his complete and unconditional love for the people through the Exodus. Because of this love, he calls on the people to remember who they are. And who are they? They are the chosen people of God. Chosen-ness does not mean favorite - God did not choose only Israel to declare his love to, but he did call them to complete a mission, which was revealing his love to each other and to the other nations. This, however, they failed to do, which is obvious in verses 9-11. The very people God called to live in love and harmony are the very people whose nation is teeming with oppression and injustice.
- *So why should Israel listen to God?*
Because God reminds the Israelites that he delivered them from oppression in Egypt (v.1), and because he reminds them that he has known them and called them (v.2), God is reminding the people of his great love and mercy. This mercy, however, will not last much longer if the people continue to turn a deaf ear to him. God is calling on the people to respond in obedience to his love and his mercy. However, if the people fail to recognize this, if they fail to remember who they truly are - children of God—, then they will continue to fail in hearing him.

APPLY:

Option 1:

Ask the youth: *What do you think God is saying or trying to say to you at this moment in your faith journey? Is it something you want to hear, or is it hard to hear? Is it possible that sometimes we feel like Israel—that we are God's favorites—and we don't really need to listen to God?*

Spread out the collection of pictures you brought.

Instruct youth to browse through the pictures and find one that best portrays how they feel about responding to what they feel God might be saying to them. Then have the youth split into pairs or triplets and share about the significance of their picture. Encourage them to pray for one another.

Option 2:

As a class, create a poem or illustration on the newsprint that portrays what God might be saying to your nation (the U.S. or Canada.) If Amos were here today, what might his message be?

Close with a time of prayer for God's message to get through to the decision-makers in your country.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

(Some of the insights are in the Explore the Bible section.)

Although God declares punishment for Israel, he does not cease to be a loving God. His judgment does not counter his love, instead it is an act of love in the deepest sense. As Walter Wink states in his book, *The Powers That Be*, "Divine judgment is intended not to destroy but to awaken people to the devastating truth about their lives... Judgment no longer is the last crushing word on a failed life, but the first word of a new creation." Punishment was clearly not God's first or second or third choice in dealing with the Israelites. He even sent prophets to help the people hear, and still they rejected him and consequently the way of his Kingdom.

God's grief about the impending destruction of Israel can be heard through Amos as he points out the injustices of Israel. This is an attempt to make them aware of their downward spiral. Amos speaks verses 3-8 not as a way to threaten Israel into responding to the Lord, but as a way to show them the inevitability of their destruction if they continue on this path they have created, ignoring God. The action and reaction response is reiterated through each verse.

At the beginning of this passage, God uses language which would remind the Israelites immediately of the Sinai covenant created after the Exodus. Verse 1 states, "...that I brought up out of the land of Egypt..." Such a sentence is a blatant reminder to the people to remember this covenant, and consequently God's act of deliverance - an act of love. This very reminder would be strong enough to normally provoke a response from the Israelites, a response of obedience and faithfulness. Yet clearly the Israelites have forgotten who they are and whose they are.

References:

Harper Collins Bible Dictionary

Believer's Church Bible Commentary: Hosea & Amos

Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Hosea - Micah

The Powers That Be, Walter Wink

Session Reproducibles

SKIT

Characters:

- God (male or female)
- Amos (male)
- Witnesses (male or female or both)
- Israel (male or female)

Set up:

Israel stands in the middle. Have a way to label him/her in an obvious way, whether that's by a sign or in some other way. Throughout the whole skit, he/she should be preoccupied with his/her own self. Israel should be portraying a very self-absorbed persona. Never should he/she look at God, Amos, or the witnesses, or appear concerned with what they are saying or doing.

God should portray a broken-hearted parent watching his children create their own destruction through their own evils. It is important that God's grief comes through clearly in this skit.

Amos is a reluctant prophet for the people. His prophesies have been rejected previously. He should portray a tired, frustrated, but clearly concerned messenger.

The witnesses are the two who voice the obvious answers to the rhetorical questions voiced by Amos. They should portray people who are merely certain of their answers and who would question why anyone would answer otherwise. They are not egotistical or boastful, rather they help draw the attention to the obviousness of the questions. They should be on "stage" the entire time Israel is, but one on each side of him/her and towards the back, out of the direct focus.

As Israel stands in the middle, absorbed with his/her self, God slowly circles him/her, always looking upon him/her with love and sadness, almost pleading for Israel to listen. God can gesture when appropriate, but not touch.

God: "Hear this word, O people of Israel. I speak against the injustices you have created - you, the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt. *You only* have I known so intimately out of all the families of the earth.

Therefore I will hold you accountable for all of your wickedness and punish you.

(God stops circling, looks away in sadness, and gestures for Amos to enter, who reluctantly comes. Then God steps back from the focus and allows Amos to speak. With every set of questions that Amos asks, he switches sides. So if he begins to the left of Israel, he should move to the right after his first question, then back again to the left after his second question and so on. He too can gesture when appropriate, looking at Israel, but never touch.)

Session Reproducibles

Amos: Do two people walk together unless they have decided to beforehand?

(Walks to the other side of Israel.)

Witness #1 (steps forward a little bit, while still behind Israel, then returns after the line): No.

Amos: Does a lion roar in the forest if it has not caught any prey?

Does a young lion cry out from its den if it has caught nothing?

(Walks to the other side.)

Witness #2 (steps forward a little bit, while still behind Israel, then returns after the line): No.

Amos: Does a bird fall from the sky when there is no trap to cause it to do so?

Does a trap spring up from the ground when it has nothing to catch?

(Walks to the other side.)

Witness #1 (steps forward a little bit, while still behind Israel, then returns after the line): No.

Amos: When the trumpet is sounded, warning destruction, are not the people of the city afraid?

Does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it?

(Walks to the other side.)

Witness #2 (steps forward a little bit, while still behind Israel, then returns after the line): No.

Amos: Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing it to his servants, the prophets.

The lion has roared, who will not fear?

The Lord God has spoken, who would not prophesy what he has said?

(Amos steps back a bit, away from Israel, pauses, and then directs his attention to both witnesses, who come together and walk toward him.)

Assemble yourselves on Mount Samaria (gestures toward Israel and continues on in an almost desperate anger) and see all of the social disorder within the country, notice all of the riots in the streets. Look at all of the oppression: the innocent being jailed, the courts of justice being ruled by injustice.

(God re-enters and both Amos and the witnesses step back, out of the focus, but not completely off the "stage.")

God (looking over at Israel): They do not know how to do right. They store up all of the material wealth they have gained through violence and robbery.

(Then God stands beside Israel, directing his attention to him/her, not just in anger but also in despair.)

Session Reproducibles

An enemy shall surround this land and they shall strip you from your security. All of your strongholds will be raided. Just like a shepherd who only rescues two legs of his sheep, or an ear, from the mouth of a lion, so will the people of Israel who live in Samaria be rescued.

(Remaining in the same spot, God turns his head to address both Amos and the witnesses.)

Hear, and testify against the house of Jacob (gestures toward Israel), against all of Israel.

(Then God pauses, looks back at Israel as if waiting for a response, but understanding that none will come, moves a step or two away from him/her. Then, still looking at Israel, he continues speaking more quietly, in a sad manner.)

On the day that I punish Israel for their sins, I will take away all of their security, even their last grasp for a safe place to find refuge. And I will tear away all of the riches they have stored while the poor remain poor.

(God turns, then walks away.)

Amos (still out of the focus): Thus says the Lord.

(Then he too turns away and follows slowly after God, while the witnesses exit from the opposite direction, leaving Israel still in the middle, still self-absorbed.)