

Justice in the Gate

I have to confess, I was a little overanxious for most of this week thinking about this message. Talking about money is awkward enough but talking about the One helpful definition of economics as a discipline comes from the American Economics Association, which [defines](#) economics in several different ways: “It’s the study of scarcity, the study of how people use resources and respond to incentives, or the study of decision-making. It often involves topics like wealth and finance, but it’s not all about money. Economics is a broad discipline that helps us understand historical trends, interpret today’s headlines, and make [reasonably accurate] predictions about the coming years.” In other words, economics is an exploration of how scarcity and abundance are negotiated and, crucially, who gets to negotiate this. And like all of the scientific disciplines we’ve looked at already in this Epiphany series, it sheds a lot of light on a critical part of our lives—as individuals and as a society. As the American Economics Association points out, “Economics ranges from the very small to the very large. The study of individual decisions is called microeconomics. The study of the economy as a whole is called macroeconomics.”

I realize this is a very basic explanation, but I think that’s sort of what’s needed in a way because one complaint a lot of economists have about the way discussions of economics happen, and certainly the way so much of the press reports on it, is that it tends to center on a few particular measures of economic health, for example, the stock market, or gross domestic product (GDP), or the unemployment rate. These are far and away the most widely reported-on measures in the press, and, of course, these are deeply important indicators of economic health. But as economists often warn, these only tell us so much of the story. The top 1% of American households own half of all stocks, showing just how much stock ownership is concentrated at the top of the economic ladder. GDP as an economic measure was created against the backdrop of the Great Depression and WWII and simply measures the output of every industry—nothing more. And the unemployment rate

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drastically understates the inadequacy of existing job opportunities by not counting “missing workers,” potential workers who, due to the weakness of these job opportunities, are neither employed nor actively seeking a job. When we factor in other elements of the story, a clearer picture emerges.

When we consider wage data, for example, and learn about the gap between productivity and a typical worker’s wages, which is the difference between value added to the economy by workers and how much they’re compensated for that value, we see jarring disparity. I think most of us tend to feel that a rising tide should lift all our boats—that as the economy expands, everybody should reap the rewards. And, as this graph shows, that’s pretty much exactly how it worked for about two-and-a-half decades beginning in the late 1940s. Over this period, the pay of typical workers rose right along with productivity. As worker productivity increased and the economy expanded, there was a commensurate increase in workers’ pay. But in the 1970s, as you can see, this started to change. And this change, over time, has produced the staggering levels of wealth inequality that have come to characterize our economy nowadays. The distribution of wealth in this country since that time has skewed ever more toward the very wealthy, leaving the overwhelming majority of Americans in a rather precarious financial situation. Now we could and perhaps should, isolate and think through some of the individual causes of this. But the bottom line is this: Our fates are linked, but our struggles are not. And when this happens, as today’s passage amply illustrates, widespread misery and suffering is the inevitable result.

As our text shows, the economic dynamics we’re pondering today long predate capitalism or any contemporary notion of a free market enterprise system. Our passage today, speaks of social injustice against a backdrop of great extravagance and wealth. Amos, who was himself probably pretty well off compared to the many farm workers he spoke up for, was probably active between 760 and 750 BCE during the reigns of Kings Jeroboam II of Israel and Uzziah of Judah. In the

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eighth century, under their reigns, the geographical reach of Israel and Judah reached its farthest extent, and the relationships of trade these expansions opened up placed great strain on farmers whose output was swallowed up by new, emerging systems of centralized agriculture created by Israel's monarchs. Uzziah, who began his rule at 16 years of age following the death of his father Amaziah, is said by the Chronicler to have ruled in Jerusalem for 52 years (2 Chron. 26:3). Uzziah's reign sees significant territorial expansion, "even to the border of Egypt" (2 Chron. 26:8), and encompasses significant new infrastructure, much of it to accommodate the impetus for a sprawling economic system of which agricultural output was an integral part, "for he loved the soil" (2 Chron. 26:10) or, as one translation, more faithfully than most, captures it, "for he was a lover of arable land."¹ In other words, the king loves the fertile means of production, not the fertile land as such.

These means of production allow the regime access to a kind of escape, as it were, from the entanglements of covenant. Amos 3:1-2 makes it clear that the source of our reluctant prophet's anger is a covenantal promise that Israel breaks faith with. He says "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known/ of all the families of the Earth;/ therefore I will punish you/ for all your iniquities." The reference to Egypt is key to understanding this covenantal violation, because it is in Egypt where God's people were enslaved in order to build "treasure cities" to further the opulence of the 18th dynasty. This experience of unspeakable misery and suffering, as we know, was the impetus for God's liberatory intervention in the exodus account; this firsthand knowledge of the pervasive and intolerable indignity that comes of amassing wealth for a few at the expense, and even to the detriment, of the many, is distilled in the special relationship God forges with the Hebrew people.

¹ Davis, Ellen F., *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 124, 209.

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The Israelites were liberated from their chains in Egypt and led into a land where they could live with dignity and autonomy but ultimately chose, against God's wishes (lest we forget), to establish a monarchy, just like the nations surrounding them, and then wound up torn into two kingdoms as the lust for power and greed drove a wedge between the northern and southern kingdoms in their respective pursuits of ever expanding economic power. Amid the sprawling array of economic relationships, farmers were forced into a new relationship with their own lands through an outrageously unjust process that stripped land from poor farmers and distributed it to a rising class of monied elite who then retained these very same farmers to work the lands as serfs. So this centralized agricultural system became a mechanism for realizing extraordinary wealth for a relative few at the devastating expense of farmers on whose labor and deep knowledge of the land this wealth-extracting system depended. Amos's call in verse 15 to establish justice in the gate explicitly implicates the formal legal structures of Israel. But it also implicates a foundational paradigm on which these legal structures are premised. More than merely establishing justice in the formal structures of civil life, establishing justice in the gate (Heb. sha'ar, literally "an opening") means also setting to rights the fundamental orientation to the land and to life itself.

The question for us, I think, is not whether an economic policy or a system is capitalistic or socialistic, but whether it is sufficiently rooted in the reality that we are, as Dr. King so memorably put it, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." This reality is the basis for covenant. In fact, one way you might express it is that a covenant is a conscious choice to act on the awareness that our fates are wedded together. That is we make the choice to honor this fundamental principle of relationship that orders and sustains our collective life when we live as though that truth were true. Entering into covenant means saying, I see that we are connected and I will act accordingly. No matter how persistently the powers and principalities of our world try to convince me that I can live with little to

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no regard for others, I must resist thinking that my well being comes with no effect on or responsibility to others. We can ask, regardless of our commitments to one economic theory or another, “Does it directly (as opposed to indirectly) link our struggles together in full recognition of our linked fates? Or does it seek escape from this covenantal entanglement? Does it, in deference to the ideology of individualism, simply deepen the illusion of our separateness, allowing us the pretense that the blessings that accrue to some and the miseries that attend many others simply come down to “personal choices” (i.e., microeconomics)? Civilizations built on this illusion foster love for the perks of society without the responsibilities of sociality. Covenantal belonging helps us to see that the ties that bind us one to another are, paradoxically, the very source of liberation we ultimately seek.

Establishing justice in the gate might, if we're fortunate, end with a reformation of the social systems and structures in place that allow for such egregious imbalances as we see in our passage and in our own society. But it begins by establishing justice in the gate of our hearts and minds, where notions of who's worthy of abundance and who isn't form perceptions that color our perspective, often in ways we don't really notice or appreciate. It can be easy to forget, and I have to remind myself all the time: We are not our tax brackets or our holdings. We are not our debts or deficits. We are people of the covenant—pledged in our commitments to God, to one another, to our communities, and, as we'll discuss next week, to the entire community of Creation. May we remember that our economy is made up of subjects, not objects. May we remember that we are a people of covenant, and that our successes and failures happen not apart from but in tandem with the communities we belong to and serve.