

Evicted

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Ancient Witness: Amos Chapter 3 (selected verses)

Yesterday, the moratorium on evictions passed under the CARES Act expired, and experts in the news are saying that we should expect a tidal wave of evictions that is unprecedented. A group at Princeton University predicts that up to **28 million people** could be evicted in the coming months and face homelessness. That is over one quarter of the 110 million people who rent in this country face eviction by the end of September.

A few states have provided their own moratoriums. Gov. Inslee extended the moratorium here in Washington state to October. But a national crisis of evictions is upon us as I speak. And the moratoriums only pause evictions but provide no rent relief, leaving renters with huge bills they will not be able to pay.

Total unemployment claims have climbed back up to one and a half million a week, and over 30 million are collecting unemployment benefits right now. About 5.4 million families have lost their employer-based healthcare, leaving an additional 27 million people without health insurance. The number of people who are poor is rising in this pandemic. In each of the past three months, more than 30% of Americans have not made their housing payments. Unless there is federal intervention with some kind of rent relief, even more people will find themselves unable to pay their rent. Landlords would also face default on their mortgages.

The situation was dire before COVID-19 and the economic collapse. The housing supply of not enough units being built, and this has been driving up rents at all ends of the spectrum for several years. As the private market is not producing enough supply, there has been a lack of federal support for developing low-income housing as well. So before the pandemic, only one in four households that were eligible for help actually received a subsidy.

Local governments are being asked to develop rental support programs without federal support, and now local and state governments are facing historic revenue shortfalls in the economic collapse, as congress refuses to consider providing relief for these local governments. The scale of this crisis requires significant federal action, and without it, millions of people will be plunged into turmoil.

In 2016, Matthew Desmond wrote his book, *Evicted*, about the crisis after the economic crisis in 2008 when over 5 million families faced foreclosure. The problem has only gotten worse. He writes,

Families have watched their incomes stagnate, or even fall, while their housing costs have soared. Today, the majority of poor renting families in America spend over half of their income on housing, and at least one in four dedicates over 70 percent to paying the

rent and keeping the lights on. Millions of Americans are evicted every year because they can't make rent. (p. 4)

And so it is clear that there was desperate need to major assistance before COVID-19, and that has been really amplified with the pandemic and our economic crisis. Those who are immediately at risk of losing their housing are the lowest income households. Before COVID-19, poor families have already been living in apartments they cannot afford, apartments that are at the bottom of the market. Our cities have become unaffordable to our poorest families, and this is doing immeasurable harm to generations of people. Now their situation is becoming even more desperate.

Desmond, who is a sociologist who followed several families and landlords in Milwaukee in his acclaimed ethnography, writes,

Even in the most desolate areas of American cities, evictions used to be rare. They used to draw crowds. Eviction riots erupted during the Depression, even though the number of poor families who faced eviction each year was a fraction of what it is today. A New York Times account of community resistance to the eviction of three Bronx families in 1932 observed, "Probably because of the cold, the crowd numbers on 1,000." Sometimes neighbors confronted the marshals directly, sitting on the evicted family's furniture to prevent its removal or moving the family back in despite the judge's orders. The marshals themselves were ambivalent about carrying out evictions. It wasn't why they carried a badge and gun. (p. 3)

He points out that in languages all over the world, the word for "home" designates not just shelter, but warmth, safety, family, even the womb. Home is the center of life, a refuge from the pressures of the world, a place of nurture and growth. This gives us an idea of why the toll of eviction is so devastating. He says,

Losing your home and possessions and often your job; being stamped with an eviction record and denied government housing assistance; relocating to degrading housing in poor and dangerous neighborhoods; and suffering from increased material hardship, homelessness, depression, and illness—this is eviction's fallout. Eviction does not simply drop poor families into a dark valley, a trying yet relatively brief detour on life's journey. It fundamentally redirects their way, casting them onto a different, and much more difficult, path. Eviction is a cause, not just a condition of poverty. (p. 297)

This massive wall of evictions that is coming bring lasting devastation to this nation. It will shred civil society. Neighborhoods will become destabilized as people take temporary homes they have no interest in building around, simply a place to stay until they get things on track, not putting down roots, meeting the neighbors and building a community. It is hard to overestimate the damage.

We have lost sight of some important things in this country, it seems to me. We have seen in the past decades are growing callous disregard for the poor and struggling neighbors. These priorities are reflected in these past four months, as the wealthy improve their position, while the

disposable essential workers lose ground. American billionaires have seen their wealth increase by \$700 billion while millions have lost their jobs, livelihoods and now their homes.

Meanwhile, congress helps out Wall Street to the tune of \$4.5 trillion, gives tax breaks to billionaires and refuses to give rental assistance to those in desperate need. And they refuse to see that a healthy economy operates from the bottom up, not from the top down. Something is terribly wrong in this nation.

It is reminiscent of the nation to whom Amos spoke. He said:

Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the Lord has spoken against you—

*“Assemble yourselves on the mountains of Samaria;
see the great unrest within her
and the oppression among her people.”*

*“They do not know how to do right,” declares the Lord,
“who store up in their fortresses
what they have plundered and looted.”*

“On the day I punish Israel for her sins,

*I will tear down the winter house
along with the summer house;
the houses adorned with ivory will be destroyed
and the mansions will be demolished,”
declares the Lord.*

Their greed had made them shortsighted. They were blind to the reality that when so many are suffering and deprived that the entire nation will suffer. There are real world consequences to hoarding the wealth and ignoring the poor. Later on the prophet says,

*You trample upon the poor [impose heavy rent on the poor]
and impose a tax on their grain.*

*Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.*

*For I know how many are your offenses
and how great your sins.*

The nation that ignores the plight of the poor is not just acting immorally, but it also brings catastrophe upon itself. In a nation where 5% own more than one home, we cannot allow millions to have no home. In a nation that has great mansions for the few, we cannot allow homelessness for the many. Amos says that this simply is not sustainable.

But there is another way. Instead of being guided by fear and greed, we can be motivated by compassion and justice. Instead of viewing others as mere objects that provide services and work, we can view them as each created in the image of God, deserving dignity and necessities for life. And we can acknowledge that having a home is a basic human right. There is another way. Before it is too late. As a nation we need to act. We need to hold our lawmakers and our policy makers to account. For this is not who we want to be as a nation.

Jesus and his followers were part of a different way, the way of compassion and justice. There is an account in the book of Acts where some of the followers of Jesus were dragged before the governmental authorities, and so-called religious people shouted, "These people are turning the world upside down!" (Acts 17:6-7) What does that mean? It means to make the poor and downtrodden a priority for once, instead of catering only to the needs of the elite. And they also said, "These people are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor." That is, they were challenging the priorities of the empire with a different set of priorities.

Earlier this week, there were bills proposed in both the Senate and House of Representatives to make a modest 10% cut in the huge military budget. The reasoning is that during this pandemic which has already claimed at least 150,000 lives of American citizens and caused the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression, we need to reprioritize to meet the needs of our nation in distress. Sadly, this was voted down.

Friends, may we uphold the Jesus way and challenge the priorities of the empire. We live in a world where corporations are bailed out and the wealthy are given tax breaks while the poor and working class are discarded and ignored. May we, like Jesus, turn this world upside down.