

ADVENT IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

The Prophetic Witness of the Twelve on the Threshold of the Incarnation

Class One — True Worship and Justice

Amos, Micah, and Joel

Session One of Four

PRIMARY TEXTS

Prophets: Amos 2, 4, 5; Micah 3, 6; Joel 2

Advent Fulfillment: Matthew 23:23; Acts 2:14—21; Luke 1:46—55

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Opening Prayer

Almighty God, You gave Your people the feasts and the sacrifices as gifts of Your grace, and when they hollowed those gifts into empty show, You sent the prophets to call them home. Open our ears to that same summons this Advent. Rend our hearts by Your Law and turn us by Your Spirit. Prepare us to receive the One who comes to accomplish in us the repentance He commands. Through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

I. Opening and Framing

What Does God Want From Our Worship?

This session moves through five movements, tracing one arc from Sinai to the manger. We do not begin with Israel's sin. We begin with God's gift, because the outrage of the prophets only makes sense once we see what was thrown away. God gave Israel the feasts, the sacrifices, and the solemn assembly as instruments of His grace. Israel hollowed them into religious

performance while trampling the poor. The prophets prosecute the case, history vindicates them, and Christ fulfills what Israel could not. One Hebrew word runs underneath the whole hour: shuv (שׁוּב), “to turn, to return.” It is the thread that ties Joel to the Baptist to the font where you were baptized, and it will run through all four sessions of this series.

Discussion Question

If God Himself gave Israel the feasts, the sacrifices, and the solemn assembly, what did it mean when the prophets declared that God now hates the very worship He instituted? What must have gone wrong for a gift to become an offense?

1. The prophets we meet today are called “minor” only because their books are short, not because their message is small. They span roughly four centuries; this session focuses on the eighth, when Israel and Judah were at the height of their prosperity and the depth of their corruption. Before we begin, what do you already associate with a prophet’s work — prediction, denunciation, comfort, or something else? Hold your answer. By the end of the hour it may have changed.

One thing to watch for throughout. Three different Hebrew words in this session name the same missing quality: constancy. Israel could not sustain what it could start.

Key Vocabulary

‘Abodah (עֲבֹדָה): “Service, worship, labor.” The same word covers service to God in the sanctuary and service to the neighbor in daily work. In Israel’s tongue, worship and work were never two separate drawers.

Mishpat (מִשְׁפָּט): “Justice.” From a root that often means to save, rescue, or deliver. Not a passive standard of fairness but active advocacy that puts right what has been warped.

Tsedakah (צְדָקָה): “Righteousness.” Not abstract moral purity but concrete acts of deliverance — “the movement from hostility to hospitality, especially toward people on the fringes.”

Chesed (חֶסֶד): “Steadfast, covenant love.” Help given by one who is able toward one who cannot help himself. It runs through all four sessions of this series.

Shuv (שׁוּב): “To turn, to return.” The prophetic word for repentance — a complete reversal of direction, not merely regret. The spine of the whole series.

II. The Original Gift — True Worship: What God Gave at Sinai

Before we hear the prophets thunder, we have to see what God actually gave.

Read Exodus 23:14–17, Deuteronomy 10:12–13, and Deuteronomy 16:16–17 aloud.

Deuteronomy 10:12–13 (ESV)

“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?”

Deuteronomy 15:13–14 (ESV)

“And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.”

Key Hebrew Terms:

‘Abodah (עֲבֹדָה): “service, worship, labor.” The Septuagint renders the priestly sense with latreia and leitourgia, the vocabulary the New Testament then applies to the whole Christian life (Romans 12:1).

Reqam (רָקַם): “emptily, with empty hands.” The word in “none shall appear before me empty-handed” — and the same word governs the release of a debt-slave in Deuteronomy 15:13.

The feasts and sacrifices were never a burden God laid on Israel’s back or a payment system for purchasing His favor. Psalm 50:8–13 dismantles the pagan assumption outright: He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and has no hunger any livestock could satisfy. In the peace offering the blood was poured out to make atonement, the fat was burned, and the meat was returned entirely to the worshiper for a festive meal in God’s presence. God is the Host and Israel are His guests. The feast is divine hospitality, not a transaction.

2. Deuteronomy 16:16 commands that no one appear before the LORD “empty-handed,” yet God insists He needs nothing from His creatures. The same Hebrew word governs Deuteronomy 15:13: do not send a freed slave away empty, but load him from your flock and your winepress, “as the LORD your God has blessed you.” The slave’s hands are filled because the master’s hands were filled first. If the offering supplies no need in God, what does it accomplish in the worshiper who brings it?

3. In Israel’s law the same word, ‘abodah, covers both “worship” and “work” — service to God and service to the neighbor. One commentator observes that neither activity “has integrity apart from close association with the other.” What does it do to our idea of Sunday morning if the God of Israel refused to file worship and daily labor into two separate drawers?

4. Deuteronomy 10:12 asks, “What does the LORD your God require of you?” and answers with five verbs: fear, walk, love, serve, keep. Notice the order — reverence comes first and obedience comes last. Why does the sequence matter, and what happens to a person who reverses it?

III. What Israel Lost — The Eighth Century: Prosperous and Faithless

A nation that praised God on the Sabbath and cheated the poor on Monday, and saw no contradiction in it.

Read Amos 2:6–8 and Micah 3:9–12 aloud.

Amos 2:6–8 (ESV, abridged)

“...they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth... they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined.”

Micah 3:11–12 (ESV)

“Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the LORD and say, ‘Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.’ Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.”

Historical Context

The prosperity of the eighth century was not a sign of favor; it was a gap between empires. In 796 BC the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III crushed Damascus, and Assyria then entered roughly forty years of internal weakness that historians call the Assyrian Interval. With Damascus broken and Assyria dormant, Jeroboam II of Israel (793–753 BC) and Uzziah of Judah expanded into the vacuum, and Israel reached its greatest extent since Solomon. The wealth concentrated in a small predatory class — ivory-inlaid palaces, luxury couches, aggressive land acquisition — while the poor fell into debt and legal slavery. Religion stayed busy: the shrines at Bethel and Dan were thronged, and thoroughly syncretistic. The mirage ended the moment Tiglath-pileser III took the Assyrian throne in 745 BC.

One detail about Micah 3:12 worth knowing. The Masoretes, who counted every verse of the Hebrew Bible, treated the twelve Minor Prophets as a single book of 1,050 verses and marked its

exact midpoint. The middle verse of the Book of the Twelve is Micah 3:12 — the sentence of doom on the temple mount, which we are reading in the first session.

5. In Amos 2:8 the wealthy stretch out beside the altar on garments seized from the poor and drink wine bought with fines extorted from them. The law of Exodus 22:26–27 required a poor man’s pledged cloak to be returned by sundown, because it was his only blanket — and God attaches His own character to the statute: “when he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.” What is uniquely damning about worship whose furniture is the plunder taken from its victims?

6. One commentator sums up the eighth century as “praying on their knees in the temple and preying on their neighbors everywhere else.” The two tables of the Ten Commandments — duty to God, duty to neighbor — have been torn apart. Why is it impossible, in God’s covenant, to keep the First Table while trampling the Second?

7. In Micah 3:11 the leaders judge for bribes and the priests teach for money, and in the same breath they say, “Is not the LORD in our midst? No disaster shall come upon us.” They had turned a gracious promise into a talisman of moral immunity. Where does a congregation today face the same temptation — to treat membership, heritage, or a full sanctuary as proof that all must be well?

8. Micah says Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the rare Hebrew word he uses is the same one he used of Samaria in 1:6. Judah watched the north fall and assumed the south was exempt. Micah tells them they get Samaria’s sentence, word for word. Where do we assume that what happened to someone else could not happen to us?

IV. The Prophetic Word — The Indictment and the Promise

Each prophet prosecutes, but none leaves the courtroom without a word of hope.

Read Amos 5:18–24 and 4:4–5; Micah 6:1–8; and Joel 2:12–17 aloud.

Amos 5:21–24 (ESV)

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Micah 6:3, 8 (ESV)

“O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!... He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Joel 2:12–13 (ESV)

“‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.’ Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Key Hebrew Terms:

Nachal ethan (נַחַל אֶתָּן): an “ever-flowing stream.” A nachal is a wadi that floods in winter and dries to cracked mud in summer. Ethan means perennial — a wadi fed by a hidden underground spring, so that it runs through the driest season.

Yom YHWH (יוֹם יְהוָה): “the Day of the LORD.” Israel awaited it as vindication; Amos reverses it into judgment. The subject of Class Two.

Pesha‘ (פֶּשַׁע): “transgression, rebellion.” In Amos 1—2 the plural names the war crimes of the pagan nations. In Amos 4:4 it names Israel’s worship.

Riv (רִיב): “dispute, legal case.” Micah 6:1–2 uses the word, though the passage does not follow a formal courtroom procedure.

Shuv (שׁוּב): “to turn, to return.” In Joel 2:12 Israel is to turn; in 2:14 God may turn. The same verb governs both parties.

The shock of Amos is that God declares hatred for worship He Himself instituted. The feasts of Amos 5:21 are the very feasts of Exodus 23, and He calls them “your feasts,” disowning His own liturgy. He then names seven elements He refuses — festivals, assemblies, burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, songs, and instruments — and the fifth of those is the peace offering, the meal of divine hospitality from Movement II. As you work through Amos, Micah, and Joel, watch the movement in each: from indictment to promise, from Law to the first notes of Gospel.

9. A. AMOS. In Amos 5:24, God demands that justice roll down like a nachal ethan — a perennial stream fed by a hidden spring, not a seasonal ditch that floods after a storm and lies bone-dry all summer. Israel’s righteousness was seasonal: a flood of zeal at festival time, a dry bed in the marketplace on Monday. What does a stream fed from an underground source suggest about where lasting justice must come from? Can we manufacture it out of ourselves?

10. A. AMOS. Israel longed for the Day of the LORD as their day of vindication over the nations. Amos says it will be darkness, not light (5:18–20), and the repeated phrase points back to Genesis 1:2 — the pre-creation darkness. God is coming to un-create the world order they have built. What does it mean to eagerly desire God’s coming while living a life that contradicts His character? How is this a warning for a people keeping Advent?

11. A. AMOS. In Amos 4:4 God imitates a priest’s call to worship — “Come to Bethel...” — and then finishes it, “and transgress!” The verb is from pesha‘, the word Amos spent chapters 1

and 2 using for the atrocities of the pagan nations: ripping open pregnant women, deporting whole populations, burning a king's bones to lime. Israel's worship is filed under the same heading. Under what conditions does the act of worship itself become an offense to God?

12. B. MICAH. Micah 6 opens with God summoning the mountains as witnesses — and then, instead of accusing Israel, He takes the stand Himself: “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me!” Israel had complained about Him, and He invites their testimony. No answer is recorded. Why is being asked what God has done wrong harder to face than an indictment would have been?

13. B. MICAH. Micah calls the earth's foundations “the enduring ones” — the same Hebrew root as the ever-flowing stream of Amos 5:24. The mountains have not changed since the day they heard the covenant made. Israel has. What does it say that God's witnesses against His people are simply things that stayed put?

14. B. MICAH. In Micah 6:6–7 the worshiper's offers escalate in panic: calves, then thousands of rams, then ten thousand rivers of oil, and finally “my firstborn.” Every previous offering was external to him; if sin comes from a person, he reasons, the payment must too. What does this desperate auction reveal about every attempt to buy off God? Where does self-justification finally drive a guilty conscience?

15. B. MICAH. Micah 6:8 answers the panic with three things, and Israel had proposed four. God asks for less than they imagined He was demanding. Why is “walk humbly” — dependence rather than achievement — the exact opposite of the presumption Micah condemned in 3:11?

16. C. JOEL. Joel 2:13 commands, “Rend your hearts and not your garments.” Tearing one's clothes was the standard outward sign of grief and could be done for pure show. Tearing the heart cannot. The very next verse of Deuteronomy 10, after the five verbs of Movement II, commands the circumcision of the heart. What is the difference between a repentance performed for an audience and a repentance that runs to God? Which one can a person produce on demand?

17. C. JOEL. Joel 2:12 says, “Return (shuv) to me,” and Joel 2:14 asks, “Who knows whether he will not turn (shuv) and relent?” The same verb governs both the sinner and God. Given that we are by nature unable to turn ourselves, whose turning must come first — and what does Joel's “Who knows?” protect against, if repentance could be used to force God's hand?

V. History Vindicates the Prophets — Samaria Falls

The prophets were not making suggestions. God kept His word in real time.

Read 2 Kings 17:5–8 and 13–18 aloud.

2 Kings 17:13 (ESV)

“Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, ‘Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes...’ But they would not listen.”

Samaria fell in 722 BC after a three-year siege. Shalmaneser V began the campaign and Sargon II claimed the conquest and carried out the deportations. The political cause was a failed gamble: Hoshea had been paying tribute, then secretly appealed to Egypt and withheld payment, and the Egyptian help never came. But the narrator of 2 Kings gives a different diagnosis — the sins of Jeroboam, the syncretism of the Omrides, and the rejection of the prophets God kept sending. He names them: Amos, Hosea, and Micah. Two of the three are prophets of this session, and the third opens Class Four.

18. The narrator of 2 Kings 17:13 puts the same word, *shuv*, in the mouth of “every prophet and every seer.” The fall of Samaria was not arbitrary; it was the end of a long, patient appeal that Israel rejected. If God’s word of judgment proved this reliable, what does that certainty mean for His words of promise — Micah’s ruler from Bethlehem, Joel’s outpoured Spirit — still hanging unfulfilled?

19. The northern kingdom believed its election was a guarantee: God’s favorites, with full shrines, could not fall. 722 BC shattered that. Yet even in judgment God preserved a remnant and kept the line of David alive in the south. How does the fall of Samaria hold together two truths at once — that God will not be mocked, and that God will not abandon His plan to send the Messiah?

VI. The Advent Fulfillment — Christ Answers the Prophets

Everything the prophets demanded, God Himself comes to accomplish.

Read Matthew 23:23; Acts 2:14–21; and Luke 1:46–55 aloud.

Matthew 23:23 (ESV)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”

Luke 1:52–53 (ESV)

“He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”

The session now pivots from the Old Testament to the New. The prophetic shuv becomes the Baptist's cry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." One note as we cross: the Greek *metanoeō* ordinarily means a change of mind, but in Luke 24:47 the risen Christ defines it by the Hebrew sense of turning, a change of direction, and sends the apostles to preach that. The same God who commanded the turning now comes, in the flesh, to work it.

20. In Matthew 23:23 Jesus names the "weightier matters" as justice, mercy, and faithfulness — the triad of Micah 6:8, now on the lips of the incarnate Lord. The third word is not "faith" in the sense of trust; it renders the Hebrew for faithfulness in conduct, from the same root as "amen." The Pharisees tithed their garden herbs while neglecting these. In what way have they simply repeated Israel's eighth-century failure?

21. Jesus adds, "without neglecting the others." Tithing garden herbs was actually commanded (Leviticus 27:30), and straining a gnat from wine was careful obedience to Leviticus 11. He does not condemn the small obedience; He condemns using it as a substitute for the large. What is Jesus refusing to throw away, and why does that matter for how we hear this whole session?

22. At Pentecost, Peter declares that Joel's promise is now fulfilled: the Spirit is poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:16–21). The Greek verb pictures a torrential downpour on parched ground. The prophets demanded a rent heart; Israel could not produce one. What does the Spirit now do at Pentecost, and in every baptism, that Israel could never do for itself?

23. Mary's song (Luke 1:46–55) gathers the themes of Amos into the announcement of the Incarnation: God scatters the proud, casts down the mighty, fills the hungry, and sends the rich away empty. Amos grieved that no one mourned the ruin of Joseph; Mary sings that God has come to the aid of the lowly. How is the Magnificat the Gospel answer to the indictment Amos could only pronounce?

24. Luther's first of the Ninety-Five Theses reads: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' He willed that the whole life of believers should be one of repentance." The prophetic shuv, the Baptist's *metanoia*, and Luther's thesis converge: the baptized Christian lives in perpetual Advent, always being turned by the Word. What is the difference between hearing "repent" as a demand you must satisfy and hearing it as the Lord's ongoing gift of turning you toward Himself?

25. THE HINGE. Israel's worship and justice were always coming apart; ours do too. But there is one Israelite whose worship and justice were never once severed — who loved God with a whole heart and the neighbor perfectly, and who then offered Himself as the one sufficient sacrifice. If Christ is the true and faithful worshiper in our place, does this study end in a demand we must meet, or in a righteousness already given to us? Explain the difference.

Synthesis and Closing

Text	Contribution to Session Theme	Key Term
The Original Gift	God gives worship and justice as one covenantal life; the offering echoes a blessing already received (Exodus 23; Deuteronomy 10; 15)	‘Abodah
What Israel Lost	Worship severed from justice; the Assyrian Interval mistaken for favor (Amos 2; Micah 3)	Mishpat / Tsedaqah
Amos	Worship filed under the war crimes of the nations; justice must flow from a hidden spring (Amos 4—5)	Nachal ethan / Pesha‘
Micah	God takes the stand as defendant; the panicked auction answered with three things (Micah 6)	Riv / Chesed
Joel	Rend the heart, not the garment; the same verb turns the sinner and God (Joel 2)	Shuv
History Vindicates	Samaria falls in 722; God’s word proves reliable in judgment and promise (2 Kings 17)	Shuv
Advent Fulfillment	Christ is the true worshiper; the Spirit works the turning we could not (Matthew 23; Acts 2; Luke 1)	Metanoia

26. Where in our own worship life has the gap opened between outward observance and inward reality — the very gap Amos exposed? Name it honestly. What would it look like for shuv to happen, not in ancient Israel, but in this congregation?

27. What comfort is there in knowing that God does not merely command repentance and then wait to see whether we manage it, but comes in Christ to accomplish it — that the turning He demands is the turning He creates by His Spirit and His Word? How does that change the way you will hear “Prepare the way of the Lord” this Advent?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, the true and faithful Worshiper, whose worship and justice were never severed: You are all that the prophets longed for and more than they could say. Rend our hearts by Your Law, turn us by Your Spirit, and clothe us in Your own perfect righteousness, that our

Advent cry, “Prepare the way of the Lord,” may be answered by the One who prepares His own way and comes to save. To You, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all glory, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Appendix: Liturgical, Lectionary, and Hymnic Connections

Liturgical Connections

The prophetic call to repentance is the very voice of Advent. When the congregation sings “Prepare the way of the Lord” and hears John the Baptist read on the Second and Third Sundays of Advent, it stands in the direct line of Amos, Micah, and Joel. Every Advent is a return to the original gift: a people summoned again to have their hearts rent and their eyes lifted to the coming Lord. Note also that the offering, rightly understood, belongs to Movement II rather than to the collection plate. It is a confession of faith — an echo of a blessing already received — and not a premium paid on a policy.

Lectionary Connections

Joel 2:12–19 supplies the historic Ash Wednesday call, “Rend your hearts and not your garments,” binding the beginning of Lent to the beginning of Advent under one word: *shuv*. Micah 5:2–5, the ruler from Bethlehem, appears in Advent (Series C) and at Christmas, and its promise stands behind this whole session as the answer to Micah’s own indictment. Amos 5:18–24 is appointed near the end of the Church Year in Series A, at the point where the calendar turns toward Advent.

Hymnic Connections

LSB 344: “On Jordan’s Bank the Baptist’s Cry” — The Baptist’s call connects the prophetic voice to the congregation’s Advent preparation

LSB 357: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” — The cry of a people who have heard the indictment and long for the One who sets it right

LSB 332: “Savior of the Nations, Come” — Luther’s Advent hymn: the nations’ Savior accomplishes what no prophet, priest, or king could

LSB 346: “When All the World Was Cursed” — The Baptist as the bridge between the prophets and Christ

A note on dates. This series follows the chronology of the commentaries throughout. Jeroboam II reigned roughly 793–753 BC; Samaria fell in 722 BC; and the fall of Jerusalem, which Classes

Two and Three will treat, is printed as 586/587 BC to reflect a long-standing disagreement over regnal reckoning rather than a dispute about the event.