

An old episode of “Alfred Hitchcock Presents” TV show was about a woman in prison who became good friends with the prison caretaker. When a prisoner died, the caretaker would ring the bell, get the body, put it in a casket, and nail it shut. Then, placing the casket on a wagon, he would take it to the graveyard outside the prison walls and bury the corpse.

Knowing this routine, the woman prisoner devised an escape plan and shared it with the caretaker. “The next time the bell rings,” she said, “I’ll leave my prison cell and sneak into the coffin with the dead body. Nail the lid shut and take the coffin outside the prison with me in it. Bury the coffin,” she continued, “and because there will be enough air for me to breathe for some time, you can come back to the graveyard that night, dig up the coffin, and set me free.”

The caretaker agreed to the plan.

One day the woman prisoner heard the ringing of the death bell. She arose, walked down the hallway, found the coffin containing the dead body, and climbed in. Soon she heard the pounding of hammer and nails. The coffin was lifted onto the wagon and taken outside to the graveyard. After the dirt was poured on the coffin, she began to giggle out loud, “I’m free, free!”

Feeling curious she lit a match to identify the prisoner beside her. In the glimmer of light she discovered that she was lying next to the dead caretaker! In classic Alfred Hitchcock fashion this final scene fades as we hear the woman screaming, screaming, screaming, then silence.

Have you ever been buried like that before? Sure you have, and so have I. We’ve been buried in questions. “If God is so good, why do I hurt so bad?” “If Jesus is the light, why am I in the dark?”

We’ve been buried in disappointment. “You’re fired!” “I don’t love you anymore!” “I have no respect for you.”

We’ve been buried in the past—the minute we lost our temper, the hour we lost our purity, the day we lost control, the years we lost our priorities.

Buried, boxed in, six feet under, again, right here, just now; it's dark, tight, and claustrophobic. And if there isn't screaming, there are heavy sighs, lifeless looks, and broken hearts.

Amos envisions a day when Israel's temple will be judged and the people will be dead and buried. The vision considers all of the possible ways of escape and then slams each door shut just before "all the sinners of My people" (Amos 9:10) are able to reach safety.

The vision begins with the words "I saw the **Lord**." The prophet's use of "Lord" connects his vision with his third creation hymn in Amos 9:5-6, which begins "the Lord GOD." The one who commands the destruction in Amos 9:1-4 is none other than the Creator of the universe depicted in Amos 9:5-6.

The prophet's vision came at a time of great security and abundance for Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. Economic growth and military might were both on the rise. But it was all a house of cards. Amos announces that the capitals and thresholds of Bethel's temple will shake, leading to its destruction and God's judgment of Israel's leaders. Everything and everyone will be destroyed. The earthquake mentioned in Amos 1:1 will finally reach its chief destination, Bethel. The temple at Bethel had many altars (Amos 3:14), but "the altar" in Amos 9:1 probably refers to the greatest and grandest altar at Bethel.

The prophet then lists seven divine actions in Amos 9:2-4. The number **seven** here means that all possible escape routes will be blocked off. Israel's leaders will have to face the LORD (4:12) no matter where they attempt to hide. God will find them in Sheol, in heaven, in the thick forests and numerous caves in Mount Carmel, in the ocean floor, and even in a foreign land during their captivity.

Psalms 139 affirms the LORD's presence in the midst of a vast and threatening world. Amos 9:2-4, on the other hand, is a guarantee of God's destructive dominion. What is affirmed as hopeful, God's dominion over the universe, is Israel's reason to be utterly **hopeless**. In 722 BC, Samaria came to an end. The temple burned. The walls crumbled. It did not seem like it could happen, but it did. Everything turned to ashes.

The late, great radio commentator Paul Harvey once told of an experiment involving a chimpanzee to whom scientists were determined to teach written communication. For fourteen years project directors labored with this chimpanzee, providing symbols in his cage to enable him to form syllables. Finally, the day arrived when it seemed the chimpanzee was actually going to make a sentence. Word went out. Other scientists crowded into the room. They watched breathlessly as symbols were formed into words and words formed into a sentence. At last, the first message from the world's most pampered, most cared for, and most trained chimpanzee was about to come forth. The scientists could hardly contain themselves as they pressed around the cage to watch the history-making sentence. What did the chimpanzee communicate? Three words: "Let me out!"

We also know the cry, "let me out!"

The sin of idolatry that led to the temple toppling in Amos's vision also leads to our entrapment. Idols of money, sex, alcohol, and possessions *offer* everything. But they deliver nothing. We look around at the mess we have made of our lives and desperately cry, "let me out!"

There is refuge in another temple, also toppled and torn apart by God. Good Friday helps us recall that this temple's name is Jesus. He once promised, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it" (John 2:19). And destroy it they did. Because of your sin and mine, the Father marshaled every weapon of mass destruction against our Savior; Judas, Pilate, and Herod; thorns, nails, spear, darkness, and sweat. There was no escape for Jesus, and so we hear screaming, screaming, screaming, and then silence. It all ended "crucified, dead, and buried." Nothing is as bottomless as a pit, as lifeless as a grave, as hopeless as a tomb. Smell the mildew, the odor of blood, the stench of death. See the confines, the darkness, the sealed stone.

But this temple will be rebuilt. In Amos 9:11 the LORD promises, "I will raise up the falling tabernacle of David. I will repair their breaches, and his ruins I will raise up, and I will rebuild it as in days of old."

But how will that help us? We are still cramped by the chaos, suffocating in the stillness, trapped in transgressions, and overwhelmed with our silent scream. What shall we do?

I've got an idea.

Let's light a match and see who we're buried with. Paul writes in Romans 6:4, "We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life!" Again in Colossians 2:12 the apostle announces: "Having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead."

We are not alone when life caves in and our many sins and transgressions trap us in despair. In baptismal promises Jesus still comes to raise us out of the ruins. And so our silent scream is forever changed into a baptized and blood-bought, "Thanks be to God!" Amen.