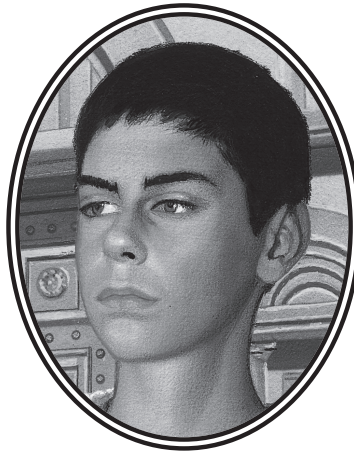


Amon's Adventure



A Family Story for Easter

Arnold Ytreeide



To Helen and Willard
Without you, my life, my
faith, and this story would not
be what they are today.

Amon's Adventure: A Family Story for Easter

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Before the Story

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Joel 2:13



R*end your heart.*

If a better definition of Lent exists, I don't know what it could be.

The tradition of Lent reaches back to the fourth century A.D. New converts were baptized on Easter Sunday in those days, and Lent was the official time of preparation for that act of faith. So, originally, Lent was intended to lead to baptism.

For most Christians today, Lent is more a time of spiritual renewal. In many churches, the focus is still on penance and repentance—of recognizing our own tendencies to sin—but it can also mean any time of concentrated searching for a deeper relationship with God.

The season of Lent is said to last forty days, though if you look at a calendar it actually spans more than that. And in fact, even today, various traditions count the days differently. In general, though, the forty days of Lent begin on the seventh Wednesday before Easter and run up to Maundy Thursday (the day before Good Friday), without counting any of the Sundays in between.

But the point of Lent, or any other time of spiritual focus, shouldn't be to follow a set of

prescriptions and rules, it should be to seek a deeper understanding of and commitment to God. It's not a time to check off days on a calendar; it's a time to rend your heart, to do some spiritual housecleaning, to take a long, hard look at what's inside you. A time to allow God to show you the work he's ready to do in your life.

That's something you can do no matter what your faith tradition might be.

Lent continues to be a time of preparation for Easter. There's nothing magically spiritual about the dates—God is as open and willing to accept you at any other time of the year as he is during Lent. And it *is* a tradition, not a biblical mandate. But in a world that makes it difficult to focus on God and seek him with determination, Lent, like Advent, is a natural and obvious time for such a quest.

Amon's Adventure is a devotional story designed to carry you through the season of Lent. As you and your family read through the adventures of Amon and his friends each day, and spend some time reflecting on God's working in your lives, it is my hope and prayer that you will discover anew the fresh and revitalizing power of the resurrection.

Use *Amon's Adventure* with your friends, your family, or all by yourself, and prepare yourself for the celebration of Easter. Prepare yourself . . . by rending your heart, and opening it up to hear what the Creator wants to say to you.

Giving It Up for God

Giving up something for Lent is one traditional way to observe this season. Sometimes people choose a sin or bad habit to give up, following the theme that Lent is a time to repent. Sometimes people choose to give up something pleasurable, like candy, following the theme of denying yourself for the sake of Christ. One specific form of this is to fast during Lent, limiting yourself to one meal a day during the week, with no meat or fish.

In any case, some people feel that, for the forty days of Lent, the idea is to eliminate something from your life in deference to God, both to free yourself and to focus on your relationship with him.

Does God care? Yes, I believe he does. I believe that any time we turn from our sins, or sacrifice that which we love, in order to have a closer relationship with God, he cares very much.

Is God moved by your actions? That depends, I think, on why you're doing it: are you

“giving it up for Lent” out of ritual, law, or show? Then, no, I don’t think God is moved (remember the Pharisee and the tax collector of Luke 18:9–14). But if your motives are pure and your desire is for God alone, then I believe God will see your acts of devotion and hear your longings for more of him, and fill you with the fullness of his presence.

Here are two simple tests you can use to check for proper motives: (1) How many people do you *tell* that you’re giving up something for Lent? and (2) Is it purely a ritual for you, or a true act of devotion?

A Suggestion for Self-Deprivation

If you want to take part in the Lenten tradition of “giving something up,” even if that’s not a practice your particular church emphasizes, then I have a suggestion. In all my years studying theology, I’ve come to believe that the definition of sin is quite simple: sin is selfishness.

We sin against God by being self-determining, doing what *we* want instead of what *he* wants. In a very real way, by being selfish, we choose to be our own god. God calls that *idolatry*.

We also sin against others by being selfish, taking something away from them (money, freedom, happiness, love) in order that *we* may have it. In a very real way, by being selfish, we are trying to be God for others.

So if you want to give up something for Lent, how about selfishness? Perhaps you could spend these forty-plus days asking God to help you find the root of your own selfish motives, actions, and desires, and then cut that root. It could be the start of something revolutionary in your life.

It could be the start of something you want to continue, even after Lent.

The Days of Lent

Some of the terms surrounding Lent can be confusing if you didn’t grow up in a church that teaches them. Here are some quick definitions, but again, remember these are *traditions*, not biblical mandates.

Ash Wednesday: The beginning of Lent (in most traditions); the seventh Wednesday before Easter. Ashes are a way of reminding us that “dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19). Often, literal ashes are placed on the forehead as an act and reminder of repentance.

Palm Sunday: The Sunday before Easter, commemorating Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, when crowds of adoring people placed palm branches in his path.

Maundy Thursday (Holy Thursday): The Thursday before Easter. Commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus, and the institution of Holy Communion.

Good Friday: The Friday before Easter. Commemorates the crucifixion and death of Jesus.

Easter Sunday: While not technically a part of Lent, this is, of course, what Lent leads up to. Celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and the power of God over physical, spiritual, and emotional death.

An Important Note to Parents and Teachers

No matter how you look at it, the Easter story is a tough story for kids. In the final analysis, it is a positive story, of course—a story of ultimate love. In fact, it's the *most* positive event ever written about. But before we can arrive at that end, we must endure the means God used to get us there: a betrayal, an arrest, a beating . . . and the cruelest of deaths.

The resurrection of Jesus is the catharsis to this story—the place where all our pain and grief and anger are finally resolved into complete victory over all that is unfair and unjust. But the journey to get to that point can be mighty painful. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John make us fall in love with Jesus. And then he's murdered.

It's just a tough story for kids.

But it's a true story, and a story full of truth, so it's a story kids need to understand. When I sat down to write this book, I struggled with how to present the story of Jesus for a wide range of ages, in a way that would inform but not traumatize children. My answer to that dilemma is *Amon's Adventure*.

Stories are built on drama, though, and drama is based in conflict. And sometimes conflict is upsetting to children. While there is no graphic violence “on screen” in this story, the plot does lead us through some scary territory. So if you have a child who is very young, or particularly sensitive, I urge you to pre-read each chapter, and leave out any parts you feel would be too frightening to him or her.

Still, *Amon's Adventure* is a story with meaning at many levels—more, probably, than even I am aware of. It is my prayer that your children—and you—will find a new and deeper understanding of God as you explore together the most obvious demonstration of his love.

How to Read This Book

You may, of course, choose to read *Amon's Adventure* at any time and in any way you'd like. But since it was designed as a family devotional for the Lenten season, you may want to read it in installments during that season.

The season of Lent covers seven weeks, or forty-plus days, so it's difficult to divide a story to fit neatly across that time. You and your family can decide how best to read the twenty-eight chapters of *Amon's Adventure*. Here are some options:

- start on Ash Wednesday and read a chapter every couple of days
- start on the fifth Saturday before Easter and read a chapter a day until Easter
- start on Palm Sunday and read several chapters a day, finishing on Easter

In any case, do be aware that the last few chapters are much longer than those in the rest of the book, because I wrote in "real time," and many events took place on those days. Check ahead, and plan extra time for reading during those last days before Easter.

Finally, no matter what timetable you select for your readings, you can use the thoughts at the end of each chapter for personal or family devotions. These devotional thoughts bring out elements of the story to challenge you and your family to a deeper understanding of and relationship with Jesus. They're just a starting point, but can lead you into discussions and meditations, even journaling, as you reflect on God's powerful love.

Pronunciation Guide

Biblical names can sometimes be difficult to pronounce. In reality, no one probably knows for sure what the proper pronunciations are. If you grew up in a Western culture, your mouth may not even be *capable* of pronouncing these names correctly! But for those who would like to conform to at least a pretense of a guide (admittedly inaccurate), here is how I have chosen to pronounce some of the names you'll encounter in *Amon's Adventure*:

Amon = uh-MAHN

Caiaphas = KYE-uh-fuss

Cornelius = core-NEEL-yus

Gamaliel = GAM-uh-leel

Jadon = JAY-duhn

Jotham = JAW-thum

Neri = NARE-ee

Raphu = rah-FOO

Tamar = TAY-mar

Uri = YER-ee

You can also visit www.JothamsJourney.com to hear pronunciations of these names.

Special Features

You'll find lots of additional material on our Web site, including:

- reading quizzes for children
- facts about life in Jerusalem during the time of this story
- facts about Jewish holidays and celebrations
- a floor plan of Amon's house, the temple, the Fortress of Antonia, and the house of Caiaphas
- maps of the markets and other locations inside Jerusalem
- pictures of the temple
- photos of Jerusalem today
- and more!

You can access this free bonus material at www.JothamsJourney.com.

Chapter One

Surprise!

A shadow moved across the stone wall of the stable. Amon sucked in his breath and tried to steady his heart. The shadow could mean only one thing: the notorious thief Benjamin was just around the corner, on the other side of the wall, having tracked Amon through the rabble of the marketplace. At thirteen, Amon had seen many such thieves pass through Jerusalem, but none so treacherous as the scoundrel Benjamin.

Amon raised his sword high overhead. Sweat trickled down his cheek, and he silently wiped it against the scratchy cloth of his tunic. In moments Benjamin would burst through the archway that separated the stable in which Amon hid from the stall of the cheese seller on the other side. Amon's eyes darted around the stable, across the piles of hay, up to the sagging rafters, and over to the . . . window! As always, it took Amon only seconds to devise a plan. He slowly lowered his sword.

Ignoring the fear that begged him to scurry under the hay and hide, Amon kept one eye on the archway and one hand on his sword. Watching for rats as he moved, he silently reached behind him and untied the donkey tethered there. Then he slipped a pomegranate from his tunic and held it under the donkey's nose. The donkey reached for the fruit, his lips stretched back and teeth bared, but Amon denied him the treat. Instead, he tossed the fruit across the stable, into the hay on the other side.

Obediently, the donkey waddled across the hay-covered floor toward his prize. As he did so, he passed through a shaft of light streaming through the high window, causing a shadow to fall across the archway. A loud scream filled the stable and Benjamin the Thief plunged through the doorway, his sword raised high. Benjamin attacked the shadow, thinking it to be Amon. Before the thief realized his mistake, Amon let out his own shout. With a mighty swing

of his sword, he swatted the bandit hard across the behind with a SMACK that almost broke the juniper branch in half.

Benjamin jumped, spun around, screamed, and dropped his own juniper branch all at the same time. “Ow!” he cried. “That hurt!”

Amon fell into the hay, laughing. “Well that’s the point, isn’t it?”

Benjamin fell into the hay next to his friend and started laughing as well. “I suppose so,” he said. “But *you* could lose once in a while too, you know!”

“I can’t lose,” Amon said with mock pride. “I am the Prince of Jerusalem. I must always win!”

“Oh yeah?” Benjamin answered. “Then how come you win even when *you’re* the thief and *I’m* the prince?”

Amon shrugged and said with a simple sadness, “Sometimes the thieves really do win.”

“You boys there!” a deep voice roared from the archway. “This is no place to play! This is a place for serious work! Now get on home and do your chores!”

Amon laughed at the gruff face of the cheese seller. “You know full well, Josiah, that if you weren’t so busy you’d be playing Princes and Thieves yourself!”

“I would do no such thing,” the cheese seller roared. But then he broke into a grin and added, “I’d be playing King’s Ransom if anything!”

They all laughed, then Josiah went back to his cheese selling and Amon tied up the donkey. As Amon and Benjamin walked out through their friend’s stall, Josiah tossed them each a taste of cheese and waved goodbye.

Amon loved living in Jerusalem. His parents had moved here when he was five, in order to find him the best possible teacher for his Torah lessons. That was eight years ago. Eight years to learn every alley and cistern and tunnel and crooked street of the great city.

As the two friends passed through the Valley of the Cheesemakers inside the southeast walls of Jerusalem, Benjamin relived every detail of the afternoon’s game to his friend. It had started the moment Amon had stepped out of the house of Gamaliel, his teacher. Benjamin, a hand shorter than his older friend, had attacked without warning, and then the chase was on. It led them from the Upper City, where rich merchants and Jewish leaders lived, down steep and narrow streets, and under the arches of the viaduct, to the Lower City, where the poor and jobless Jews lived, then back under the viaduct to the Tyropoeon Valley, also known as the

Valley of the Cheesemakers. Looming over them from the east during the entire chase were the walls of the Temple Mount, and the spires of the temple itself. And of course, the whole city was enclosed in a thick, high wall of stone.

But Amon wasn't much listening as Benjamin recited his tale of the game. He was looking up at the temple, and once again could not resist its call. Benjamin was just getting to the part where they had climbed the aqueduct when Amon stopped in mid-stride. Benjamin kept walking for a moment, before he noticed that his friend was no longer beside him. He stopped and turned toward Amon, then got a look of disgust on his face. "You're going up to the temple again, aren't you?"

Amon tried to give a look of apology. "I'm sorry, Benjamin," he said. "God is calling to my heart, and I must obey."

Benjamin put one hand on his hip and turned his look of disgust toward the ground. "Why can't he call to you at *home*?" he said. But then, looking fearful that he'd just committed blasphemy, he waved his hand at his friend and said, still without looking Amon in the eye, "I know, I know, Jehovah is first in your life, and that is how it should be." Then he looked at Amon hopefully and added, "But can you come out and play King's Ransom with us tonight?"

Amon smiled. "I will try," he said. And then, with a wave, the two friends parted, Benjamin heading home to the Upper City while Amon turned toward the temple.

All of this would not be a problem in another year. Then Benjamin would also be thirteen and, assuming he learned his lessons and could impress the rabbi, he also would be allowed to enter the Court of Israel, deep inside the temple complex. Until then, Benjamin could only go as far as the Court of Women. That was fine when you were a child, but as you approached the age of manhood it became more and more embarrassing to remain with the women and children, especially when your best friend got to join the men.

Amon understood all of this—he had been in that same position just a few months before—so he didn't try to convince Benjamin to accompany him. Climbing out of the valley, he headed up to the south wall of the Temple Mount. These walls were made of a white stone that gleamed in the sun. They stood higher than ten men stacked atop each other, and ran for a day in every direction, it seemed to Amon. He made his way to the bathhouse at the foot of the southern stairway and followed some other men inside.

Amon had first been inside this building three months before. One day, a short time after his

thirteenth birthday, his father had taken him to see a rabbi. His father, Jotham of Jericho, told the rabbi that Amon was of age and ready to be tested. The rabbi had Amon recite a long series of passages from the Torah, then asked him many questions about the law. When Amon answered every question flawlessly, and recited every verse without error, the rabbi proclaimed him to be a man. Jotham had then brought Amon here, to the temple, and to the Court of Israel, where only Jewish men were allowed.

Every day since then, Amon had returned to the temple, sometimes alone like today, sometimes with his father. All of these memories danced through his head as he waited in line for the baths. Out of the corner of his eye he saw several young men he knew, but greeting an acquaintance in the baths was strictly against the rules. When it was his turn, Amon followed the ritual his father had taught him on that day—a ritual every Jewish man must follow before entering the temple. He stepped into the first pool, a shallow one for washing the hands and feet. This done, he stepped into a larger pool, through which water flowed constantly from a cistern on the other side of a short wall. Here Amon immersed himself completely, washing away not only the dirt of the city but also, symbolically, the dirt of his sins.

Refreshed and renewed, Amon climbed the steps to the Double Gate in the wall of the Temple Mount. Inside, he strode quickly up the winding tunnels, coming out on top, into the sunlight reflecting off the white stones of the temple itself.

Large enough to hold the entire population of Jerusalem, it seemed, the flat top of the Temple Mount was completely paved in stones, and was known as the Court of the Gentiles, since even non-Jews were allowed to be here. But Amon was not interested in the merchants and money changers of this court. Pushing his way through the crowds, he made his way over to the temple walls, which stood in the center of the much larger Court of the Gentiles. As he entered through a gate in this wall, Amon passed by a stone inscribed with a warning, painted in red: “No gentile may enter the temple. Any caught doing so will bear the responsibility for his own ensuing death.”

Keeping his eye on the soaring peaks of the temple, Amon passed through the Court of Women, then up fifteen more semicircular stairs, past two Levite guards, and through a bronze door as tall as his house. Finally, he was in the Court of Israel with the other Jewish men, and had an unobstructed view of the temple itself. As it had every time he'd been here before, the sight brought tears to his eyes.

Of course, being just a common Jew, Amon could go no farther. Only the priests and Levites could actually enter the temple. Anyone else who tried—anyone who actually saw God inside—would die instantly. But still, to be this close to God, and in the company of many other Jewish men who stood around debating the law, or praying, or offering sacrifices, was a thrill that always made his heart sing. On his first visit here, Amon had brought with him a lamb as a sacrifice for his sins. Today he had only prayers to offer, and these he said slowly and deliberately, once again asking God for the wisdom of a man and the knowledge of a priest.

It was in the middle of these prayers, and amidst the noise of a thousand other men saying their own, and the clamor of sacrifices being made on the altars above, that Amon first saw him. A thin man, with a crooked nose and big, dark eyebrows. Three times during Amon's prayers, when he'd happen to look up to the altars at the top of the stairs, he caught the strange man staring at him. Each time their eyes met, a chill went down Amon's spine. It made him feel like he was a child alone in a dark and scary place. The temple had always been a refuge—a place of safety. But with the eyes of the thin man drilling into him, Amon felt afraid, and vulnerable. The man was up to something, Amon could tell. And he was sure it was nothing good.

Finally Amon couldn't take it anymore. Had the man been down at the level of the courtyard, Amon wouldn't hesitate to challenge him. But the man stood on the stairs to the altars, where only priests were allowed. And Amon knew better than to question a priest.

Besides, Amon decided, it was time to go home and do his chores, and that was a good excuse to escape the man's stares. He ran now, more from sheer joy than from any need to get home quickly: even the stares of a rude man couldn't spoil the joy of a visit to the temple, although Amon did look back several times to be sure he wasn't being followed.

Instead of going back the way he'd come, Amon chose the Coponius Gate on the east side of the mount, where a viaduct—a bridge—led across the Tyropoeon Valley and straight to the Upper City. He darted past the towering mansions of the wealthiest merchants and highest priests, then down the other side of the hill, toward his home just inside the city wall.

As he ran, Amon kept seeing the staring man in his mind. Now that he thought about it, the look on the man's face didn't seem so much threatening as worried. In fact, now that he was out in the sunshine, it almost seemed as if the man wanted to warn Amon of something, but couldn't.

Oh well, Amon decided. *What could a priest want to warn me about?* So he shook off the memories of the staring man and instead began checking off in his mind all the things he had to do. His mother's friend Dorcas was waiting for him to build her an automatic urn washer, one of his first inventions. Crastus, a blacksmith, wanted a small version of Amon's wind blower to keep his fires hot without so much work. And he still needed to repair the timer on the fire lighter he had invented for Benjamin's father, a device which still had half the Sanhedrin arguing whether or not it was a violation of the law for the sand a man shoveled the day before to still be working on the Sabbath.

Finally, Amon was home. He passed the corrals full of sheep and lambs and burst through the door of his house. He started to yell a greeting to his mother and father, but then stopped in mid-yell. Standing in the middle of the open room was a tall man, a shepherd. He held his staff in one hand as he stood completely still, staring up at a window. It took only a moment for Amon to recognize the man. "Uncle Jethro!" he yelled, then rushed to give his uncle a hug.

"Greetings, Amon," Jethro said, returning the hug. Then pushing him away and staring upward again he said, "I was just looking at this . . . this *thing* in your window!"

Amon looked up as well, then laughed. "It is called *glass*, Uncle!"

Tabitha, Amon's mother, stepped up then, wiping flour from her hands. "Amon invented it, so that I can have daylight in the house even on the coldest days," she said.

"I didn't *invent* glass, mother," Amon corrected. "I just found a new use for it."

"Except that until now, no one has ever seen such *clear* glass," Amon's father, Jotham, added with pride as he entered from the back room.

Jethro continued staring for a moment, then shook his head. "A rock you can see through. Now I can die," he said, "for I have seen everything there is to see."

Amon quickly learned that his uncle was in town to sell some of his lambs. With the Passover approaching, many lambs would be needed to supply the pilgrims coming from across Palestine. Both Amon's father and uncle would be more than happy to sell them their sacrificial lambs.

Amon and his two younger brothers, Jadon and Uri, quickly finished their chores. Up on the roof where they all slept during the summer, Amon carefully put away his flute, writing tablet, and other items he used in his lessons, making sure each was laid out straight and in its proper place. Then they all sat down to a festive dinner.

Jotham and his older brother shared much news of the family, and Jethro was pleased to hear that Amon was now a man. As he sat back, listening, Amon couldn't help but feel he was the luckiest boy—or rather *man*—in the world. He had a perfect family (well, almost), he lived in the best city in the world, and he could visit the temple any time he wanted. Nothing at all could ruin such a perfect life!

But then, as the last of the daylight filtered through Amon's glass windows, Jethro mentioned that he'd run across one of Jotham's old friends, Bartholomew of Tarichae. Amon vaguely remembered the name, but his father yelled in delight.

"Bartholomew!" Jotham said. "How is my old friend!"

Jethro smiled, and the joy around the table infected even Amon, though he didn't know why. "He is well," Jethro answered, "and following a new rabbi."

"Yes, so I'd heard," Amon's father said, stroking his dark beard. "But not so new," he added with a lopsided grin and one eyebrow raised.

Amon's stomach seemed to turn inside out. That funny look on his father's face meant that Jotham was falling into one of his "spells." Long ago Amon had figured out that his father's head was sick: he saw things that didn't really exist, and told wild, impossible stories about himself as if they were actually true. Because of his father's condition, Amon never brought any but the closest of his friends home with him.

As Jotham launched into one of his fanciful tales about his friend's new rabbi, he suddenly stopped in mid-sentence. His face clouded over as he said, "But I've also heard there is some trouble."

"That is true," Jethro answered. "And that is why Bartholomew asked me to ask a favor of you."

Jotham nodded in concern and said, "Anything at all for my friend."

"He asks," Jethro continued, "if his daughter, Tamar, may come and live with you for a time."

Amon sucked in his breath and tried to steady his heart, but his fear could not be subdued. *A girl! Living here! In his house!* His voice screamed inside his skull, *What could be worse?*

But then Amon's father answered that silent question. "Of course she may stay with us," Jotham said. Turning toward his eldest son he added, "And since they're almost the same age, Amon will be her host!"



Surprise! Just when you thought you had your life all straightened out, along comes something that sends you into a tailspin. It's just happened to Amon, and it's about to happen to you, if you take Lent seriously. The first step in seeking the Christ of Easter is to ask, "Where am I, Lord? How can I better live your love? What is there in my life that displeases you?" Before repentance can take place, before spiritual growth, there must come a moment when we recognize that, apart from Christ, we are lost.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.

ISAIAH 53:6

Lent is a time to refocus our lives on God, to throw out the trash of our own sin, and prepare to let the power of the resurrection wash across us once again. We start that process by asking God to reveal our sins, to show us what needs to be done, to interrupt our lives.

As you spend time with God this week, keep yourself open to the possibility that he may see things inside you that you don't even realize are there. Keep yourself open to the gentle leading of the Holy Spirit, and allow him to throw you into a tailspin.