

Fed Up!

Amos 8:1-12

July 21, 2019

First Presbyterian Church

Introduction to the Reading

There are two things I want to mention before the reading.

First, a couple of weeks ago,

when I emailed Steven that I was preaching from this text

I could literally hear his groan all the way from China Grove.

I quote from his email to Nancy, Kim and Susan

about choosing their music for today's service:

"Whit's Scripture Lesson for July 21st is Amos 8:1-12,

which is truly a "God-forsaken" pericope."

Then Steven adds:

"I would think that anthems of assurance and confidence
would be appropriate."

Well, Steven is right.

Though maybe not "god-forsaken,"

Amos is in full-bore judgment mode here...

and these ARE some tough words.

Which means that every three years

when Amos comes up in the lectionary

the preacher has to make a decision –

when is the right time to speak judgment

and when is the right time to voice hope.

Israel's prophets do both, of course –

they speak judgment AND hope –

and the "true" biblical prophet knows what to say when.

But how does the preacher know?

When is it time to comfort the afflicted?

And when is it time to afflict the comfortable?

Second, when you and I hear texts like this

I think our tendency is to hear them as personal indictments...

as if the prophet was speaking to us individually.

But today the prophet Amos's scope is wider than that.

His target is the entire nation of Israel...

and specifically, he takes aim at their economy.

Prayer for Illumination

God, source of all light,

by your Word you give light to the soul.

Pour out upon us
the spirit of wisdom and understanding
that, being taught by you in Holy Scripture,
our hearts and minds may be opened to know the things
that pertain to life and holiness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Bible Reading

This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the LORD said to me, The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,” says the Lord GOD; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.

Sermon

So, why is God in such a bad mood
that he would pull Amos aside and say these things?
Well, because Israel’s rich folk
have used their riches to burden those
who will never work their way out of debt.
Because Israel’s cleverest businessmen
have used their cleverness
to trick those who cannot think that fast on their feet.
Because profit-making in Israel
has become more important
than anything else in the land –
more important than justice,
more important than sabbath,
more important than God.

So, God pulls Amos aside
and tells him privately that it's time.
"I'm fed up. I just can't stand it anymore...
and it's time to do something about it...
time to expose the sickness of this system...
time to smash the economic idol
that security comes through wealth
and give it a proper funeral.
It's time, God says, to afflict my comfortable people."¹

Though the place is seven time zones away
and the time is twenty-seven hundred years ago,
let's see if at least parts of the story
sound familiar to you.

When Amos is called by God,
the nation has enjoyed forty years of peace and prosperity.
Israel has grown strong...
the king has reclaimed lost territories
and handed them out like gifts to his loyal supporters...
the wealthy have gotten richer and the poor much poorer.

Some people have summer houses and winter houses
and others have no houses at all.
Some people eat sumptuous meals and drink fine wines
while others make bread
from the wheat sweepings off the floor.

And especially troubling, from God's perspective,
is the gap between the two...
the have's no longer know the have-not's...
they have forgotten that they are kin –
they do not act like they are children
of the same spiritual parents.

Even more, the wealthy are convinced
that their prosperity as a sign of God's favor...
so they pour money into all kinds of sacred rituals
during which they thank God for their many blessings...
while a large percentage of their sisters and brothers
are living in hell.

This last part is what bothers God the most.
Unscrupulous merchants outwardly observe their faith –
they keep the sabbath and holy days by shuttering their shops – but their hearts
and minds are open for business 24/7.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Famine in the Land," *Home By Another Way* (Cowley-1999), 181-182

The economy is booming...
and understandably they want to capitalize on every opportunity...
but their greed makes it impossible for them
to rest on the sabbath and rejoice in the holidays.
All they can do is think about the profit they're missing...
all the time God is taking them away from their business ventures.

That's when God delivers the end of the world scenario
we heard a few minutes ago...
about the end that has come upon the people Israel...
about how their temple hymns will become wailings...
about how the sun will go down at noon
and people's hair will all fall out...
about how every day
they will feel as if they had lost their only child.

But even THAT'S not the scariest part...
the scariest part is God's promise
that people who ignore God's word
will eventually find themselves without it.

One day they will wake up to discover
that God has packed up all the good words
and left the country with them.²

This is how Barbara Brown Taylor describes it:
They will hunt in vain for any sign of those words.
When they want to say something
to heal the rifts between them,
they will stand there and look at each other with blank faces.
When they take their children in the arms
and try to remember the word
for what they feel inside of them,
nothing will occur to them.
When they are falsely accused, or charged twice what they owe,
they will rack their brains for the word
that means that is not right,
but they will not be able to find it.
They will not be able to find any of the words
God used to bring the world into being,
such as light and good or blessing.
And with those words subtracted from it,
the world will seem no more than a shadow of itself.

² Taylor, 183.

The only words left

will be words that drag it back down toward chaos again,
words such as darkness and evil and curse.

When that happens, God says,

people will know what a famine is really like –
“not a famine of bread, or thirst for water,
but of hearing the words of the Lord.”

Well, I’ll let you decide whether or not that prophecy
has come true in our day.

But I will ask: Is anyone here this morning
hungry for the kind of words that come from the Lord?

Not pious religious rhetoric,

not politics wrapped in scripture,
not this group declaring moral superiority over that group, but words that seem
to come

from beyond those who speak them,
words that startle the ear with their clarity,
their freshness, their power.

Is anyone here hungry for the kind of words
that come from the Lord?

You know, it’s part of a preacher’s job with a passage like this
to wonder what Amos might preach to us today...

if this herdsman from Tekoa –

a little nothing of a town about 10 miles south of Jerusalem –
what if he walked into Hickory today, what would he say?

First, I think he would talk to us about our silos.

I read of teacher of biblical theology who,
on the first day of a new semester,

opens his class by asking the students:
“With what is biblical theology concerned?”

With what is biblical theology concerned, he asks.

And the students typically answer,

“God,” or “religion,” or “spiritual things.”

“No,” he says, “biblical theology is concerned with everything!

Sure, there may be religions
that are only concerned with personal happiness
or private morality,
but that is not Judaism or Christianity.

The God of the Bible makes no distinction
between “religious and nonreligious” concerns...
between “sacred and secular” matters.

And if Amos were standing here today,

I think he would remind us that our worship of God
is not limited to an hour on Sunday morning,
but is to continue every day of the week...
that Jesus does not only want our heart and soul,
he wants ALL of us.³
And that ALL includes justice and honesty
in our personal economic lives...
as well as honesty and justice
from in the social and economic systems
in which we all participate.

The second thing Amos might preach to us this morning
is that his call for social and economic justice
is a key part of a conservative agenda.
Yes, you heard me right - a CONSERVATIVE agenda.
“Look,” he might say,
“I know you think I’m a raging liberal...
a throwback to the radicals of the 1960’s...
Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and Marianne Williamson
all wrapped into one.

But the truth is I’m just an uneducated farmer
who is saying what our God has said from the beginning.
Justice in the marketplace...
honesty in business dealing...
compassion and care for the poor –
these are not liberal or reformist notions as you think.

These are long established values
that are emphasized over 600 times in the Bible.
And for those who want to know and follow the God of the Bible,
social justice is a conservative, though often neglected,
agenda.”⁴

Finally, the third thing Amos might eventually preach this morning
is a word of hope.
Steven was right...
THIS particular reading is absolutely “God-forsaken.”
Quite clearly and quite loudly
God condemns the systemic economic injustice
which crushes the poor...
God takes to task those business people

³ William Willimon, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 246

⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, “The Prophets and Social Justice: A Conservative Agenda,” *Word and World*, Volume 28, Number 2, Spring 2008, p. 159-161

who are outwardly religious, but inwardly greedy...
God calls to account those who benefit from an economic system
that is rigged to benefit "the few"
while "the many" are trampled on.

And in this particular reading

God is fed up... and is not going to stand for it any longer.
But what if this morning... we were to hear Amos' words
like we would a parent who is watching a two-year old
pick up a rattlesnake?

What does that parent say?

"Drop the snake!!!" of course.

The child will be startled...

she'll be frightened by the parent's loud voice and stern face...
just as we are frightened
with the loud voice and stern face God sometimes uses
to warn us away from things that can kill us.

But the truth is it's a rare prophet in the Bible

who does not eventually wind up his prophecy
by offering the people at least a glimmer of hope.

Almost always the biblical prophet

will offer some vision of restoration...

some promise of homecoming...

and sure enough even Amos' mood improves at the end.

"I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,"

God says through him.

"I will plant them in their land,

and they shall never again be plucked up."⁵

You see, God's judgment is always an act of God's mercy...

it is ALWAYS designed to warn us

when we are heading toward danger...

it is a sign that God cares about us so deeply

that God refuses to leave us to our own naturally sinful desires.⁶

And this passage today is no exception.

Well, if the absolute worst thing that could happen to us

is a famine of God's words, how can we avoid that...

how can we combat that?

One way... maybe even the best way

to combat the famine of hearing the words of the Lord

is to speak them ourselves –

⁵ Amos 9:14-15

⁶ Doug Bratt in

to speak them often to ourselves –
understanding that sometimes, like today,
they are like nitroglycerine in our mouths.
And then to try our level best to obey them and live them
as our way of letting God know we have heard the words of life.
It's not something we are supposed to do all by ourselves...
thank goodness for that!
God doesn't call many of us to stand alone, like Amos,
to warn the whole nation about the snakes it picks up.
But what God DOES DO
is call us together into communities like this one...
where the words can be spoken and heard
and can do their work on us...
even, and especially the hard words.⁷
Remember, one way you can tell the difference
between a true and living God and a dead and fake god
is that the fake god will never tell you anything
that will make you angry and uncomfortable.⁸

⁷ Taylor again, p. 186

⁸ Willimon, p. 248