

## **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 21<sup>st</sup> is Amos 8:1-12, which is truly a "God-forsaken" periscope." 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."<sup>1</sup>

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 haves 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Famine in the Land," Home by Another Way (Cowley-1999), 181-182

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. 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.<sup>2</sup>

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. 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, 183.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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 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.

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<sup>3</sup> William Willimon, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 246

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

“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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 – 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Amos 9:14-15

<sup>6</sup> Doug Bratt in

<sup>7</sup> Taylor again, p. 186

<sup>8</sup> Willimon, p. 248