

"SUMMER FRUIT"

Amos 8:1-14

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Last Sunday we met the Old Testament Prophet Amos. This is what writer Frederick Buechner has to say about him. *"When the prophet Amos walked down the main drag, it was like a shoot-out in the Old West. Everybody ran for cover. His special target was the Beautiful People, and shooting from the hip, he never missed his mark. He pictures them sleek and tanned at Palm Beach, Acapulco, St. Tropez. The stereo is piped out over the marble terrace. Another tray of bloody Marys is on the way. A vacationing Bishop plunges into the heated pool.*

*With one eye cocked on them, he has his other cocked on the **Unbeautiful People**- the varicose veins of the old waiter, the pasty face of the underfed child, the winos passed out on the other side of the fence, the ragged woman begging outside the five-star restaurant. When justice is finally done, Amos says, there will be Hell to pay. The Happy Hour will be postponed indefinitely because the sun will never rise again. The designer clothing will all fade like grass. Nothing but a few chicken bones will mark the place where the grand buffet was spread out under the royal palms. But according to Amos, it won't be the shortage of food and fun that will hurt. It will be the shortage of 'hearing the words of God.' Towards the end, God will be so scarce that the world won't even know what it's starving to death for." (1)*

Amos was a shepherd who was called to speak God's word to the people of Israel during a time of great prosperity- for some. The rich and famous didn't know what the prophet was griping about because life was pretty good and getting better. But for those they trampled upon to get to the top of the heap life was quite different and that is what made God so angry. Prophets address the gap between present failure and the hoped-for future.

Like all of the biblical prophets, Amos addressed specific people in a certain location within a known historical context. They address all aspects of life together in community- political, social, military, economic, and religious. They call for individual change of heart and large scale social change. One South African theologian states that the *"strength of the prophetic discourse is its ability to unambiguously denounce a specific situation of injustice and at the same time announce a God-willed alternative future."* (2)

Amos's call was to speak God's truth to the wealthy and powerful of the northern kingdom of Israel- especially to King Jeroboam and his pet priest, Amaziah. The king and his cronies enjoyed a time of immense prosperity at the expense of the poor. While some people were losing their land, their homes, and their families, the top one percenters were buying up multiple homes and supporting lavish lifestyles. Amos speaks against those who enjoy a life of carefree luxury while oblivious to the violence and oppression which makes it possible.

Amos isn't messing around here. Chapter eight contains some of the most terrifying words of judgment in all of the Old Testament. The chapter begins with a vision from God for Amos- and it seems pretty innocuous. A basket of summer fruit. I don't know about you but I have been eating as much summer fruit as I can lately- peaches, blueberries, watermelon, nectarines, strawberries. And they aren't only delicious, they are beautiful and colorful. But the symbolism of this vision has nothing to do with enjoying a sweet dessert. In this vision the fruit is ripe, almost overripe, to the point of rotting. And that, says God, is where the people of Israel are in God's eyes.

In the seventh chapter- which we discussed last Sunday- God gives Amos two visions of judgment against the people and Amos pleads with God not to punish them. God listens to him. But by the time we get to this fruity vision in the eighth chapter Amos, like God, has had enough. Amos does nothing to dissuade God from bringing about the terrible tragedy to come. Perhaps Amos believes that the people are beyond any hope of repenting and turning away from their sinfulness.

The whole time I was preparing for this sermon- I wasn't thinking about the people of Amos's time- I was thinking about the people of ours. Amos is preaching to people who benefit from a systemically unjust world of pervasive corruption. He is speaking to a people who have allowed sin to deaden them to the words of life. So he has to catch their attention with stomach-churning images of judgment. He says their songs of worship will become cries of sorrow; dead bodies will be everywhere.

Amos speaks out against the business people who can't wait for the holy day to end so they can continue to cheat their customers. He speaks against those who "buy the needy for a pair of sandals." Or perhaps those who buy child labor for the price of a cheap t-shirt or thousand dollar athletic shoes. Amos is speaking to us.

The created world also responds to this pervasive evil. Amos says the land will tremble, the sun will go down at noon, and the Nile will flood like they have never seen before. Amos actually prophesied around the time of a great earthquake in that region. So he knew what he was talking about.

Hilary Marlow writes, *"In Amos, the natural world operates as God's 'megaphone' to rouse an unhearing world. Rather than declaring God's glory, the non-human creation proclaims God's anger- and so is part of the dialogue between God and Israel. Since the people have not listened to warnings mediated through God's human agent, the prophet, God chooses to speak through the cosmic one."* (3)

It appears the earth listens to God in a way that humans fail to do. For Amos flood, earthquake, and fire are instruments of God's judgment. The earth responds to human sin with the same indignation that God expresses in scripture; reacting against oppressive policies and practices that diminish or destroy the creation and distort God's own intention for it. Climate change, anyone?

Amos knew, as well as we do, that those who suffer the most when the creation is perverted and misused are the poor and those who benefit the most are the rich. It seems as though these days God doesn't have to send judgment upon us to punish us because we are doing a great job of that all by ourselves.

Amos uses words of terrifying exaggeration to get their attention. They have become experts at tuning out the word of God so the prophet attempts to shock them into listening. He seeks to quiet their egocentric religious noise and political spin long enough for them to hear God's word of justice. Their arrogance leads them to seek their own benefit regardless what it may cost someone else. And that is the exact opposite of what God expects from God's people.

When God made the covenant with the people it seemed pretty simple and clear. "Love God. Love each other." But it didn't take long for them to seek other gods to love. It didn't take them long to find ways to cheat and abuse others while enriching themselves. So God sent prophets to remind them that God is a God of justice. Over and over again the prophets spoke and perhaps the people repented for a short time but before you know it they are back to their evil ways. And here is what astounds me- God doesn't give up on them. God continues to love them. That doesn't mean God lets them off the hook. It means God never truly abandons them.

William Willimon writes, *"Israel lives under the judgment of a God who loves Israel, who wants this people to be a 'light to the nations,' to show forth to the world what a people can do when they are owned by, accountable to, and called by a true and living God. One way you can tell the difference between the true and living God and a dead and fake god is that a false god will never tell you anything that will make you angry and uncomfortable!"* So which God do you choose?

What is the word of the prophet for us today? What would Amos say about governments who destroy civil society and start immoral and illegal wars? What

would Amos say to complex financial institutions who exploit and ruin the lives of everyday, hardworking people? What would Amos say to multi-national corporations who destroy the environment? What would he say to elected officials who spew words of hatred and racism?

Amos spoke to God's people over 2,800 years ago- to people who were convinced of the superiority of their own nation and the inferiority of foreigners.

Haven't we learned anything as a human race? Haven't we made any progress in our evolution as God's people?

Sometimes I don't think so. Sometimes I think people are beyond redemption and God should have taken a break from the work of creation after the last animals were finished.

Fortunately there are prophets today who still see hope in this world; people of God who can see beyond our sin and selfishness and can still recognize the human race as God's beloved, created in God's own image.

Congressman John Lewis was among the first wave of young people who marched for civil rights. He met the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. at the age of eighteen and has not stopped working for equality to this day. He became a leader of the lunch counter sit-in movement and faced abuse and violent mistreatment with nonresistance even as he was doused with disinfectant, hot coffee, and bug spray. Congressman Lewis still carries the scars from the beatings inflicted upon him when he crossed the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama.

In the forward to Congressman Lewis's book, *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE*, Douglas Brinkley writes, "*Lewis did not emerge a beaten man. Quite the contrary: every punch, every kick, every jeer made him only more determined to love his fellow human beings. His life's goal remains dazzlingly audacious; no less than the creation of the 'Beloved Community' of America, where God is made manifest, the exiled brought home.*

To John Lewis, social transformation starts from within. To revolutionize America to be ever better, he says, we must first revolutionize ourselves. And that means giving better than we get. John himself has been brutalized, dehumanized, hounded, whipped, cursed many times and in many places, and yet here he stands, his righteousness shining brighter than ever."

Brinkley writes of the book, "*There is no hyperbole or self-aggrandizement in these pages, just a man of faith who has never let anybody turn him around.*" (4)

Like Amos before him, John Lewis asks, "*What is the purpose of a nation if not to empower human beings to live better together than they could individually?*" (5) He defines the "Beloved Community" as a society based on simple justice that values human dignity and the worth of every human being.

Believe it or not, we too are called to speak the word of God. We too are called to be prophets in a world that turns a deaf ear to the Word of God. Sister Joan Chittister writes of prophetic spirituality as an attitude of the soul. She writes, "*The person with the soul of a prophet sees what the rest of the world either cannot see or does not want to see, and uses that vision as a compass through life. The prophetic spirit comes to see the world as God sees the world- and responds to it accordingly.*"

*Like the biblical prophets of old, they speak **peace** for*

*the nations, **justice** for the oppressed, **equality** for humankind, **care** for the earth, **dignity** for all, and **holy integrity** rather than control and corruption in the transmission of the faith." (6)*

We are called, she says, to "*set the will of God aflame in our midst.*" We are called to make sure that there is "*no misunderstanding about what disturbs us.*"

I am going to say that again: We are called to make sure that there is "*no misunderstanding about what disturbs us.*"

Can we do that?

Are we willing to do that?

Someone has to.

Why not us?

With God's help, may it be so.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *Revised from PECULIAR TREASURE: A BIBLICAL WHO'S WHO, Frederick Buechner. Harper and Row. 1979. P. 11.*
- *INTERPRETATION SERIES: BIBLICAL PROPHECY, Ellen F. Davis, Westminster John Knox. 2014. Pg. 208 (theologian Piet Naude)*

- *Davis, pg. 102.*
- *ACROSS THAT BRIDGE: LIFE LESSONS AND A VISION FOR CHANGE, John Lewis, Hachette Books. 2012. Forward by Douglas Brinkley, pp.xiv, xv, xvii.*
- *Lewis, pg. 10.*
- *THE TIME IS NOW, Joan Chittister, Convergent. 2019. Pg. 42.*