

“A Basket of Summer Fruit”

Amos 8:1-12

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Last week we met Amos, a gutsy guy whom God sent to tell the rich and haughty people in the northern kingdom of Israel eight centuries before Jesus that they were not living in accordance with the Word of God and that God was going to hold them accountable for their misdeeds. Bold, courageous, determined, audacious – these are just a few of the words that we could use to describe Amos. He’s like a Desmond Tutu or a Martin Luther King – outspoken, articulate, passionate, but not reckless. Amos was firmly grounded in his faith, a devout man of God, standing in the tradition of the great spiritual leaders and teachers of Israel, people like Moses and Elijah. He was deeply troubled by the way so many people took their religion so frivolously, outraged at the way the wealthy people exploited the poor, incensed by the way so many people were living without any moral center.

So God sent Amos to Israel from neighboring Judah to bring God’s Word to them. It was, for many, a word of judgment, and a word of warning. But for the poor and the oppressed, and for the people who really *were* trying to live their faith with sincerity, it was a word of comfort and hope. Amos’s message contained a clear message: God was *not pleased* with the way many Israelites were living, *not pleased* with the way Israelite society was heading. And God was not just going to sit idly by while people continued to sin and while other people continued to suffer. God was going to *act*.

We’re picking up the story today after Amos had been sent back home. The priest of Bethel, who was in league with the wicked and irresponsible king, had told Amos to leave Israel and head back to Judah. Now there are a few mysteries here. First, we don’t know if the priest was speaking his own opinion – perhaps out of exasperation – or if he was relaying a message to Amos from the king. It might or might not have been a royal decree. Second, if it was a royal decree, we don’t know if it was enforced. Did they actually *make* Amos leave? Maybe. Maybe not. Some people think he continued to stay in Israel. Others think he went back to Judah and continued his prophetic ministry there – through his writings. Whatever exactly happened, one thing is clear: he continued receiving oracles from God.

In his next vision from God, he sees a basket of summer fruit. Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it – nice, juicy, ripe fruit, like what we have on our harvest table. It sounds so peaceful! But it was anything *but* peaceful. For God then says, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” Now what does a *basket of summer fruit* have to do with *the end of God’s people Israel*? If you’re reading along in most English translations, it’s not going to feel like there’s any connection at all. But in

Hebrew the word for “summer fruit” is *qayitz*, and the word for “end” is *qetz* – almost exactly the same word. “What do you see, Amos?” says God. “I see *qayitz*,” says Amos. “*Qetz* has come upon my people Israel,” says God. It’s a play-on-words which is lost in most English translations, although the NIV does a nice job replicating it: “What do you see, Amos?” “A basket of *ripe* fruit,” says Amos. “The time is *ripe* for my people Israel,” says God. It’s clever, but the point God is trying to make through this visual symbol and this wordplay is that *Israel is in serious trouble!* “I’m not going to spare them,” says God!

Okay. What had Israel done that was so *awful*, so *heinous*, that God was sending *punishment* and *retribution* on them? A variety of things – but the primary theme that comes up again and again in the book of Amos is the fact that there were a lot of wealthy people who were ruthlessly taking advantage of the poor. They “trample on the needy” and “bring ruin on the poor;” they “deceive with false balances;” they sell their wares at exorbitant prices; they assess taxes at an oppressive rate; they own luxurious summer and winter homes, made of ivory and as big as palaces; they have planted lush vineyards, while the poor people barely have enough to eat. In short, there is a *dramatic* dichotomy between the rich and the poor, and the rich people *simply don’t care*. There’s no generosity, there’s no food bank; there are no attempts to try to *help* the poor in any meaningful way. There’s just ... *greed*.

And – coupled with the greed and the injustice – there’s a showy religion that makes the rich people *feel* good. They get excited when it’s time for the big religious festivals – time to sing, and rejoice, and celebrate all our blessings. That is to say – time to *revel in our greed*, in how *good* we’ve got it. You can practically hear them saying, “God has blessed us,” “God has *richly* blessed us” – yet there’s no notice of the fact that those so-called “blessings” have come to them not through God’s generosity but through their unfair, unjust, immoral economic system that gives privilege to the wealthy at the expense of the poor. These people *feel* like they’ve been blessed by God, when in reality all they’ve been doing is looking for ways to justify their own selfishness, hypocrisy, and greed. It’s all just *greed*.

Those rich people looked forward to an event they called “the day of the Lord” – perhaps a day, they believed, when God would intervene in human history to put Israel firmly at the head of all the other nations. Amos tells them that there *will* be a “day of the Lord” – but it won’t be like that. “Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!” he says to them. “Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light.” For – as a result of all these sins and crimes of the wealthy aristocracy – God was not going to send *deliverance* to Israel. God was going to send *judgment* on Israel. The basket of summer fruit. The *end* of Israel. A terrible day of death, destruction, and the judgment of God.

God wasn’t kidding. For a few hundred miles to the northeast, across the Syrian desert, across the Euphrates River, in what is now the northern part of Iraq, something big was brewing. At the exact same time that Amos was uttering his prophetic oracles, there was a dude named Tiglath-Pileser III who was about to dramatically change world history. (I call him TP3 for short.) In the year 745 BC, TP3 killed the royal family of the kingdom of Assyria, placed himself on the throne, and made a series of sweeping changes which transformed Assyria from a sleepy little kingdom into a mighty empire, complete with the world’s first professional army. He quickly began expanding his empire outward in all directions, subjugating nation after nation. He brought death and destruction wherever he went – slaughtering captives, enslaving whole peoples, or forcibly moving them away from their homelands. Within about

seven years his army was at Israel's doorstep. To maintain Israel's independence, the Israelite king offered to pay tribute to TP3. It was massive – about 37 tons of silver. The next Israelite king refused to keep paying the tribute – which started a series of events that ultimately brought the full weight of Assyria's power down upon Israel. In a little more than two decades after TP3's rise to power, the country of Israel had been *completely* destroyed, its population scatted. Tens of thousands of Israelites were taken to Assyria. Others managed to flee, to countries like Judah. Ten of Israel's twelve tribes were scattered, lost to history forever – the ten "lost tribes of Israel." The "day of the Lord" had come.

Amos basically predicted all of that. Not the specifics – there's no mention of TP3 anywhere in Amos's book – but Amos had the insight to know that a country with such injustices and such hypocrisy against God could not continue to endure. Amos knew the country was going to come to a bloody end.

What ultimately became of Amos ... we don't know. We have his book, the collection of his prophetic oracles. But as for Amos himself ... there is no clear record of how, when, or where he died. He had an important message, a message which ancient Israel failed to heed. The question is ... will we?

For the message of the prophet Amos endures, 28 centuries later, thanks to faithful people who preserved his words for future generations. Amos's warnings to ancient Israel are warnings to us as well. For whenever wealthy people walk all over the poor ... whenever merchants charge unfair prices for their wares ... whenever people are motivated more by greed than by generosity ... whenever people show up in church, thinking that God has richly blessed them, while all the while they ignore vitally important teachings of our God or our Lord ... Amos's warnings once again cry out for a hearing.

Last year CNBC reported that between 2009 and 2015 the incomes of the top 1% of American households grew at a faster rate than the incomes of the remaining 99% in 43 of the 50 states. Unemployment rates are low, but wages for workers have not been rising at the same rate as wages for people higher up the ladder. In 1965, CEO's were paid, on average, about 20 times what a typical worker was paid. In 2016, CEO's were paid, on average, about 271 times what a typical worker was paid! A recent study by the Pew Research Center had similar findings: wages, when adjusted for inflation, have barely budged in decades for most Americans. But for those in the top 10% income bracket, adjusted wages have increased by nearly 16% since 2000. The poor might not be getting poorer – but the rich are definitely getting richer. That may be perfectly *legal*. The question is, is it *right*?

I think Amos would say "no." I think Amos would say, *there's greed at play here*. Greed, and injustice, deeply embedded into our wage system. Amos would say, *this is not what God wants*.

But are we as fatally flawed as ancient Israel was? Maybe. Maybe not. I'm not the one to determine that. But I do know that we, as a nation, need a moral center, a code of ethics to guide our decision-making, values and principles that keep us grounded. But I don't know what those are. We're not really a Christian nation any more, if we ever were. What happens to a nation if it loses a common center? I'm not sure I want to know. But I have a feeling that as we continue to become more secular, we may find out. I just pray that things will turn out better for us than they did for Israel. A *lot* better...!

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