

July 17, 2016

TEXT: Amos 8:1–12

TITLE: Fruit in the Midst of Famine

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 on 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.

Commentator William Willimon states: “One way you can tell the difference between a 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.” The passage from Amos today can certainly be characterized as one in which we might find ourselves uncomfortable.

The prophet Amos was the most unlikely mouthpiece for God. He was a lowly herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees, a commoner and outsider; a agitator from the southern kingdom of Judah who prophesied to northern Israel, during a time of national security and material affluence; affluence and security that was enjoyed by a few at the expense of many.

The legendary Billie Holiday sang, “Them that’s got shall have, them that’s not shall lose. So, The Bible says and it still is news. Yes, the strong gets more, while the weak ones fade. Empty pockets don’t ever make the grade. Rich relations give, crust of bread and such. You can help yourself, but don’t take too much. Mama may have, Papa may have, but God bless the child that’s got his own, that’s got his own.” Brothers and sisters, it seems that truer words were never spoken. The world’s standard is: I have mine, but if you don’t get yours, shame on you.

Robin and Marian was an obscure movie in the 70s, starring Sean Connery and Audrey Hepburn who played an aging Robin Hood and Maid Marian. In the tragic end of the movie, Marian poisoned Robin Hood in order to end his suffering after he had been mortally wounded by the Sheriff of Nottingham. Once Robin Hood accepts his fate, the camera scans to a bowl of

fruit on the table in the room. This shot is subtle, but significant, because at the beginning of the movie the fruit was fresh, lovely and edible, but it is now overly ripe, rotting and well past its time of consumption.

Amos' message to Israel in the 8th chapter didn't seem to begin in a foreboding manner. God simply asked Amos "what do you see?" To which Amos replied: "a basket of summer fruit." Fruit, which we can surmise was ripe and at the peak of freshness, ready for enjoyable consumption. But immediately it becomes apparent that something was rotten in that basket, when God replied: "*The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.*" How did something as lovely as a basket of summer fruit, symbolize God's displeasure with the people of Israel?

God's commission of Amos to prophesy was an act of mercy and grace toward Israel. Amos was sent to the Northern Kingdom to deliver the message that their superficial religiosity, their refusal to trust in the Lord and their ungodly practices towards the poor were about to come to an end and would result in destruction. The summer fruit signified Israel's end. God was fed up and had lost all patience; their songs of praise in the temple would become wailings and lamentations; dead bodies would be many and scattered about everywhere.

We don't like to think of God as being anything but loving, kind, gracious and merciful, but the problem with Israel and with us is we have that expectation of God, while we trample on and take advantage of the poor, rather than being loving, kind and just ourselves. God is angry when we act unjustly, mistreating our brothers and sisters, most especially those who have the least— are we not our brother and sister's keepers?

Yesterday, I listen to the presumptive Republican presidential candidate introduce his chose for vice-president, Governor Mike Pence. He ascended to the stage, "thanked the Trump family for making the sacrifices they have made to make America great again." He expressed he was "grateful to God, his wife, his family and Mr. Trump and thanked him for choosing him to serve." Governor Pence spoke of America being "tired of waiting for politicians to get to the problems of the people."

He's absolutely correct, we are tired! Tired of a congress who hasn't done their job in years; tired of our current president being continually disrespected because he is a man of color; tired of the least of these not being provide for; tired of the senseless murders perpetuated by those who are commissioned to serve and protect and tired of the murder of those who are simply trying to do their jobs of protecting and serving. We are tired of the cuts to government programs that provide food, healthcare, safe childcare and financial assistance to those most in need. We are tired of people not being paid a livable wage, unable to provide adequately for their families. We are tired of politicians who talk a good game, but do little to ensure that what is needed by the people "*trickles down*" to those in most need; and we are tired of Black Lives not mattering. Now, please understand that it goes without saying that all lives matter, but until Black lives matter in this country, all lives don't matter!

Governor Pence declared that the solution to solving the problems of the people of America begins with electing a president who will "fight to make America respected and great on the world stage, fight for real change including cutting taxes, repealing Obamacare lock, stock and barrel on day one; building a wall and temporarily suspending immigration from countries compromised by terrorism, and appointing justices that will uphold our constitution, most especially the right to bear arms." There is something rotten in the basket of summer fruit.

The leaders of Amos' time abused their power in order to benefit themselves and had gone about to establish their own standard of righteousness. Some had plenty, while the poor in the community were suffering and ignored—living in real physical famine. Amos prophesied that spiritual famine was on the horizon and it would be even more devastating and necessary than bread and water. Some 800 years later, Jesus confirmed “it is written that we shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4) In today's Gospel passage read earlier, Jesus made even more clear when he told a complaining, worried and distracted Martha: “Mary has chosen the better part,” to sit at his feet and receive the word of God. (Luke 10:40–42)

Amos' words were for those who seemingly had it all, but were lacking the most necessary thing - the spirit and Word of God. Brothers and sisters, as we contemplate all that we are witnessing in the world today: senseless and unimaginable murders and death in our country and abroad; growing and unwavering violence and war; the radicalization of some in the name of God; injustice and unequal treatment by the criminal justice system; the ravaging of God's creation and natural disasters that destroy entire communities; physical and mental illnesses that overwhelm families and communities—let us turn to the Word of God, for in it we will find comfort, peace, understanding, sanctuary, justice and healing.

“God is indeed our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns... Be still, and know that I am God, I am exalted among the nations; I am exalted in the earth.” *Beloved, be assured and believe in faith*, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (Psalm 46).

God has not gone silent and is speaking into the spiritual famine of our day and age. Be silent and listen.

Amen.