

Spoiled Fruit
The United Church of Broomfield
July 17, 2022

Amos 8:1-12

1 This is what the Lord God showed me: a basket of summer fruit. 2 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 spare them no longer.

3 The songs of the temple[b] shall become wailings on that day,"
says the Lord God;

"the dead bodies shall be many,
cast out in every place. Be silent!"

4 Hear this, you who trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,

5 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 smaller and the shekel heavier
and practice deceit with false balances,

6 buying the poor for silver
and the needy for a pair of sandals
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

7 The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

8 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?

9 On that day, says the Lord God,
I will make the sun go down at noon
and darken the earth in broad daylight.

10 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.

11 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.

12 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.

Amos was one of Israel's great prophets. Yet at the time when Amos spoke, he took pains to remind people that he was just an ordinary shepherd and fig-tree farmer, a regular, everyday kind of person, like you or I. What he spoke were the words God had shown him.

God spoke to Amos through a series of visions that came to him when he was in worship. If you read the entire "book" of Amos, you'll quickly realize that it is extremely harsh, angry, and depressing. Amos prophesied God's anger to Israel and its surrounding nations regarding their actions. Amos' visions included swarms of locust and scorching fires devouring everything in sight. Amos preached a vision of the 'plumb line,' noting how people were out of alignment with God's commandments. Almost seven centuries passed from the time of the Exodus until Amos preaches and God reminds the people, "I don't care how much time passes, never forget history and never forget our covenant." That's why Amos' prophecies are as important to us today, another 27 centuries later.

Today's passage is the fourth and last vision that Amos shares, a basket of summer fruit. It was the annual offering of the fruits of the harvest. The offering was at the conclusion of the harvest and in anticipation of winter rains that prepared for fresh plantings. People would bring a fresh basket of the finest of their harvest and place it on the altar as a gift of thanksgiving to God. Amos' vision is the offering of summer fruits upon the altar.

God said to Amos, "What do you see?"

Now, the offering took place as it did each year, and Amos was accustomed to this, but suddenly something stirred within him. Amos responded with the obvious, "A basket of summer fruit," but there was silence as the words played over in Amos' mind --- summer fruit.

You might well be confused by this vision as I am, especially knowing that the previous visions that Amos experienced which symbolized God's anger and frustration were swarms of hungry locusts devouring crops and devastating scorching firestorms. How could a basket of ripe summer fruit, appearing to be delicious and nourishing, be a sign of God's anger - negative or foreboding - a warning of serious consequences? To understand the vision and the subsequent message of God's fury, we must understand that in the Hebrew culture, people loved to play with words. So much of the Hebrew scriptures are written in poetic styles that when translated into other languages, don't quite carry the same profundity or whimsy. Punning, rhyming, and word associations were normal for them. The Hebrew word for summer fruit was quayits, and it had a rhyming quality with qets, the Hebrew word for end as in, "the end."

It would be like Amos seeing a party with a band and dancing and God saying, "What do you see?" and Amos responding, "I see revelry" and God would respond, "Perhaps you should see reveille - the trumpet awakening the people" or "revile - how I feel in response to the people's actions."

For Amos, God was saying the ripe fruit suggested not thanksgiving for harvest and trust for winter rains but an "end" - and end to the relationship with God. What looked so ripe and beautiful was on the verge of being spoiled and rotten. This last basket of summer fruit spoke of an end time. A time RIPE for God to mete out justice. God confirmed this by saying, "The end has come upon my people Israel, I will never again pass them by."

Amos' message was an angry message and hard to hear. It was a message from an angry God and yet Amos was also angry because he feared for the soul of Israel. He was fearful that God was going to reach the limits of divine patience and give up on the people.

Even though people were actively participating in acts of worship, Amos believed that they were turning their backs on God.

If Amos was to parallel his message to us today, he would be focusing on how our culture of greed, economic injustice, disregard for equality and indifference for basic human dignity, is driving us away from God. Amos sees people becoming so consumed with power, money, and control that they lose any vital sense that they are reflectors of God in their lives. They are hypocrites.

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?"

The new moon and sabbath were times when people were directed to cease work and refocus on their connection with God in whose image, they derived the meaning of their lives. They were doing that, but Amos detected a restlessness and deception as if their bodies were in worship, but their minds were already making business plans for when the sabbath was over. They weren't truly living a Godly life, just giving a performance at the expected time and place. Their worship wasn't authentic.

Setting aside for a moment the connection between that attitude and its impact on the poor and the needy, are there signs in our society that commercialism, status, control, and divisiveness are more important than worship, honoring the sabbath and living our lives according to Christ's teachings? Look at not just our own lives, but the lives of those around us – our community, our nation, our world – does it reflect a Godly life and sincere worship of God and Jesus?

As Amos continued his preaching, he believed that when we make this disconnect between worship and our daily living, we lose the core of our identity that can easily result in ethical lapses. When our identity is so tied up with the world's priorities and our self-interests, the pressure to succeed and protect *my beliefs and my way of life*, becomes so enormous that we push the envelope of what is acceptable, right and ethical. He accused the people of making "the ephah small and the shekel great, and practicing 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 ephah was the basket in which the wheat was measured, and the suggestion was that the merchant had a deceptively small basket. The silver was weighed out with a scale with so much weight making a shekel, only here the weight was made to be extra heavy. The result was more wheat was paid for with less money, thus shaving the profit in favor of the merchant. The sweepings of the wheat were the leftover wheat on the market floor that was to be left for the poor to gather. To sweep them up for sale was to rob the poor of their food. The poor couldn't even have scraps.

The social and economic systems during Amos' time that he was decrying, as well as our current systems are not simply unjust, but evil and against all that God wants us to do. The fact was, AND IS, that we live in, participate in AND support systems of economic exploitation, human trafficking and forced poverty.

According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, income inequality in the United States has been rising for decades, with the incomes of the highest echelon of earners rapidly outpacing the rest of the population. Even among high earners, income gains have been heavily skewed toward the top of that bracket. The growth of CEO pay is illustrative of this trend. In 1965, a typical corporate CEO earned about twenty times that earned by a typical worker; by 2018, the ratio was 278:1, according to the Economic Policy Institute, a

~~progressive think tank.~~ Between 1978 and 2018, CEO compensation increased by more than 900 percent while worker compensation increased by just 11.9 percent.¹

The current minimum wage is \$7.25/hour. Two adults, working full-time at that rate, cannot afford a 2-bedroom apartment *anywhere* in the United States. Currently reports support that the average minimum wage worker would need to work 97 hours per week to afford the average two-bedroom apartment. To afford such an apartment, one person would need to earn \$24.90 per hour, yet the average hourly worker in the U.S. earns only \$18.78 per hour.²

This is what it costs to put a roof over one's head. THEN, consider food, healthcare, clothing, transportation ... It's this economic injustice that Amos is preaching about and that infuriates God. A system that oppresses the poor because it can, yet this nation still claims to be the greatest on earth.

We are entering unknown and uncomfortable economic times with increased anxiety. Inflation is rising, the cost of living is out of control and the rich keep getting richer, while the poor get poorer (and the number of poor increases exponentially). As this is happening, everyone is trying to either figure out who is to blame or simply make accusations...but is anyone asking, "who is this hurting" and "how can we help the poor and suffering in these stressful times?"

Amos' message warns, "The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." When the identity of a person or a nation is tied up in greed, power, control, and superiority, the pressure is on to push the ethical boundaries in order to "be the best" and sacrifice the will of the majority for those in power. We forget the poor, the oppressed and the dehumanized in exchange for political clout, to secure "my well-being," and for the ability to enforce "the right beliefs" on others.

Living a Godly life and worshipping authentically becomes a burden rather than a joy. Selflessly loving God and others is no longer our spiritual goals. Sabbath time becomes an interruption of what we choose to idolize and "make important" rather than a taste of heaven.

Amos' message and God's judgement isn't a bad thing, but rather a gift to us. It is a reminder and a warning that unfortunately, God must give to humanity repeatedly. Look at what you're doing? Reflect on your systems, your laws, your worship and your words and actions. Do they reflect and demonstrate a love for God as well as a love for one another?

Our world isn't all doom and gloom. There are glimpses of goodness and examples of loving, self-sacrificial acts. Do you remember the name, Dan Price? He's the CEO of Gravity Payments. He made headlines about six years ago when he sacrificed his own financial compensation to ensure all of his workers were paid at least \$70,000/year, a modest salary when one lives in Seattle. Price downsized his own life, gave up a second home and lived more modestly in order to enact his belief in running a company that valued its workers and did so with actual compensation. It was a decision completely antithetical to everything expected for running a business. "You'll be bankrupt within a year," "you'll never grow the company," ... "it the stupidest thing a CEO could ever do." Yet... six years later, the company has tripled in size and is thriving. When the company experienced challenges at the start of the COVID pandemic, several employees followed Price's example and

¹ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-inequality-debate>

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/14/full-time-minimum-wage-workers-cant-afford-rent-anywhere-in-the-us.html>

took 40-60% pay cuts in order to survive – and they did. Now they're salaries have been restored to pre-pandemic rates.

The most well-intentioned systems can cause harm if not regularly checked, reviewed, and refined. Those loud, screeching voices in power can become so myopically focused on THEIR beliefs and goals that others are hurt in the process. Logic and reason, faith and love – they become the garbage grain and the sweepings of wheat as the greedy and power-hungry trample on God's beloved. But they don't have to be. Success, flourishing, love and care for all of God's people and creation can happen with modest sacrifices, basic consideration for others and a commitment to the love we profess for God.

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The Israelites were saved from enslavement by the Egyptians and that was forgotten too quickly. The "saved" disengaged and forgot their oppression, becomes the oppressors. This is what's Amos' message is about – warning us. Don't become complacent. Don't forget whose you are. The world's ways make it too easy for one's light to turn to darkness. IF we love God, then we must *always* remember, reflect, and consider the least and advocate for them. If we want to argue semantics about "who are the least," then re-read the Good Samaritan story from last week and re-watch my sermon.

How are we choosing to be disciples of Jesus Christ when we participate in the systems of our world? Are we saying and doing that which is ethical, moral, and Godly? Are my actions, or lack thereof, helping or hurting humanity and creation? Is the Word of God, Jesus' teachings, and message to us present and alive or is there a famine?

I think Amos is right that our souls are in danger. That is not because we are evil people. We are not. It's not even because we don't wish to please God, we do. Rather, it may be because we have become so trapped in these crazy systems that we don't know how to get out of them. It's just too easy for the Word over God to be drowned out over the clamoring of false idols like corporate profits, dehumanizing wages, American Christianity, and ecological ignorance. We need to hear and heed God's Word because IT is liberating and loving for everyone, and it will get help us to get out of systems of injustice.

In the gospel of Luke (10:38-42), there is a familiar story of Jesus being in the home of Mary and Martha. Martha is feeling the burden of responsibilities of being host and complains about Mary who is simply sitting at Jesus' feet and listening. Jesus responds to Martha's complaint by saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part ..."

My prayer for us is that we will recognize before it is too late to choose the better part....to not be seen as pretty on the outside, but rotten within.

Amen

