



“Encountering Amos: Spiritual Famine”

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Amos 8:1-12 (NRSV)***

Last week, I was comparing summer preaching experiences with a fellow seminarian, and my friend Alexis expressed her frustration with the Old Testament texts that were showing up in the lectionary for July.

“I mean, last week, you have Amos predicting that someone’s wife is going to become a prostitute, and next week you have Hosea predicting that someone will marry a prostitute. What’s a preacher supposed to do with that?”

“Well,” I said, “you can do what I did; turn it into a sermon series!”

This is the second in a mini-series of sermons on encountering the prophet Amos. Last week we delved into Amos’ image of the divine plumb line and thought about how our individual lives need to be in alignment with God, so that we can become, like Amos and Martin Luther King, Jr., extremists for love and justice in our own time.

This week, we have no prostitutes; instead, we have scattered dead bodies, darkness at noon, lamentation and mourning, and what may actually be worst of all, a spiritual famine for the Word of God.

As in the text last week, our scripture this morning begins with a vision that God has shown Amos. This time, it’s a basket of summer fruit, and, although a modern reader might be able to draw some conclusions about the significance of the image, the real meaning of the vision is literally lost in translation. In Hebrew, the vision is a pun. The word for “summer,” *qaytis*, sounds like the word for “to cut off” or “end,” which is *qes*. This bit of wordplay may actually be the most ominous statement in the entire book of Amos. What at first glance seems a pleasing, sensuous image of succulent fruit becomes the rotted, moldy, insect-eaten fruit past its prime at the very end of the season. It’s an image of emptiness in the midst of abundance; Israel, once so ripe and full of promise, has rotted from within and will have to be thrown out.

Amos was preaching to a prosperous country, to a people who had political strength, who had secured their peace through military conquest of their neighbors. It was a time in which the long-held tribal family systems had broken down, and a wealthy merchant class had emerged. In the midst of this, the people had forgotten their covenant with God and their obligation to care for the disadvantaged and marginalized in society. Amos is clear about the unjust practices that have brought Israel to this foul place:

“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.’”

In other words, those prosperous and comfortable wealthy merchants had lost their spiritual center. Their observance of the Sabbath and other holy days had become merely empty ritual rather than a centering practice that maintained their relationship with the divine presence of God. Their shops may have been closed, but their minds were on the next deal, and, according to Amos, the customer was always wronged. The greedy merchants couldn't wait for the holy days to be over so they could cheat their customers using shady business practices. They would go so far as to sell the poor into slavery if they couldn't pay for so much as a pair of flip-flops.

The consequences for this injustice are menacing. The fat times are over, says Amos, and your party days are numbered. The earth will be laid waste, the dead will pile up, and all those feasts you had will turn into funerals. Not only will your behavior bring about your destruction, but a day will also come when you'll know that you need to hear the Word of God, and God will not be there.

Now, before we get too comfortable and glad that we aren't living in the ancient Near East, let us pause to contemplate our own situation for a moment.

My New Testament professor at PSR, Benny Liew, once told our biblical studies class that he gets frustrated with the more traditional biblical scholars who like to over-emphasize the differences between the ancient times and modern western culture. Dr. Liew pointed out that we, from our comfortable, privileged modern perspective, tend to be too eager to dismiss the practices of the ancient world and imply that we are a better, far more advanced culture. Our text from Amos today offers an occasion for the reevaluation of this type of modern cultural arrogance. As we read this selection from this most ancient of Hebrew prophets, it's as though Amos himself walks right up to us and pokes a big hole in our advanced culture bubble.

If we think our situation is not as ominous as that of the ancient world, a glance at the daily headlines in the last year or so may make us think otherwise. We've polluted the entire Gulf coast with the most massive oil spill in history. We are living through the most difficult and uncertain economic times since the Great Depression. 75 million Americans either have no health insurance or are underinsured. An ongoing two-theatre

war has cost trillions of dollars and thousands of lives, plunging the government into debt and forever altering the lives of soldiers and their families who return with grievous physical and psychological injuries. The threat of global warming and climate change has morphed from a theory into a reality. Attempted terrorist attacks on our own soil and in our airspace remind us of the uncertain geopolitical climate.

Amos may have delivered his prophecies nearly 3,000 years ago, but when he says that God will “make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight,” we can see our own dark days mirrored in those ancient words.

I’m not suggesting, as some very public and famous preachers tend to do, that the healthcare crisis, or the Gulf oil spill, or our own grave economic situation are God’s divine punishment for personal moral wickedness. However, I think it’s easy to see a connection between our behaviors and the results, between the injustice we’ve collectively allowed to happen in the world and the predicament we now find ourselves in. As Amos pointed out to the people of Israel, there are serious, long-term consequences for unjust corporate and political practices.

The corporate greed of for-profit insurance companies has lead, in part, to a broken healthcare system that views health as a privilege for the wealthy few rather than a necessity for all. The entire world’s greedy thirst for petroleum pushes companies like BP to drill for oil in ever more dangerous terrain and cut corners in safety and disaster response plans. The unjust lending practices of wealthy banking and mortgage companies lured countless numbers of disadvantaged homeowners into financial ruin. Amos connects such injustices with our inability to connect to God in meaningful ways, to develop a relationship with the divine that is not just for an hour on Sunday morning, but is a 24/7 relationship, a deep and personal connection that infuses everything we do. Without that relationship, we fall prey to the call of greed and injustice. Without that relationship, we begin to hear the call of the world instead of the call of the spirit. The longer we live in a world full of injustice, the more we can’t even imagine what it would be like to live in the Realm of God. As our ability to imagine that Beloved Community dies, so does our ability to hear the cries of the poor, and so does our ability to access God’s inspiration and comfort. This is a spiritual famine.

The spiritual famine is caused in part when we attempt to conveniently separate our religious lives and our work lives. Although we may be able to divide our lives into separate, discrete parts—the spiritual in one box and the secular in another, and our work lives in another—God doesn’t see it that way. For God, there is no distinction between what is religious and what is secular. God is concerned with everything. God’s care for us and God’s claim on our lives do not stop when we exit this building on Sunday morning. It continues throughout the day, and throughout the week. Amos calls us to understand that the way we live our lives on Monday through Saturday is just as much a reflection of our faith as what we do on Sunday morning.

As I mentioned last week, Amos does a good deal of afflicting the comfortable, but very little comforting the afflicted. His warning of spiritual famine to Israel is very bleak, as is our own looming spiritual famine today. How can the message of Amos be one that strengthens us to fight the injustice he names? Where, and how, do we find comfort and hope in so bleak a time?

The first glimpse of hope comes at the very end of the book of Amos. In Chapter Nine, verses thirteen through fifteen, Amos finally proclaims:

The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
when the one who ploughs shall overtake the one who reaps,
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God.

Here, in the last two verses of the last chapter of Amos, is God's promise of restoration and renewal, the image of overturning the world ruled by humanity's injustice and the beginning of a world ruled by God's justice and mercy.

Another glimmer of hope can be found in one of the darkest passages of today's text. When Amos says that God will "make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight," and turn our "feasts into mourning, and all [our] songs into lamentation," we hear in those words echoes of the darkness at the crucifixion in the Gospel of Luke: "It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two." And we know that that darkness was not the end. God did not allow the redeeming work of Jesus to be overcome by the injustice and terror of the crucifixion, but brought hope for new life through resurrection.

Finally, hope comes from our belief in the still-speaking God, the God who loves us and calls us, over and over again, into relationship. Throughout the long history of our faith we have seen that God is not indifferent to human action. Instead, Amos and the prophets reveal the intensity of God's concern for our physical and spiritual well-being and God's deep desire that we do justice, love kindness, and work to build the Realm of God here on earth. The other side of God's intense anger over injustice is God's abundant love. As theologian Marjorie Suchocki puts it, "Only a God of inclusive love could exercise wrath when love is violated."

My friends, believe the Good News that can be found, even in these darkest of times: we are loved by God—immeasurably, extravagantly! And that love lures us out of the darkness of our times, out of the darkness of our own participation in greed and injustice and into the light that is the imagined Realm of God. Every time we worship as a community, every time we center ourselves with prayer, every time we feed our spirits, every time we pause to remember our relationship with God throughout our busy week, we are reconnected to that which gives us life, to that which gives us hope and comfort, and that which gives us the strength to renew and restore the world. Amen.