

The Bible is really an extended love story- a love story between God and people. Like any love story it has moments filled with tenderness, but also moments of pain and conflict, betrayal and anger. And this story, in particular, is the story of a lopsided relationship-one in which one party is more invested in the long term health of the relationship than the other. God tries just about everything over the course of the story- everything the Holy One can think of to get us back by God's side. And often, when humans are being particularly obstinate or worse, God does that herding, that speaking through people- people we call prophets. Amos, from whom we just heard, is one of those people.

Amos was an older contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea, who came from Judah (the Southern Kingdom) but preached in Israel (the Northern Kingdom). Both Kingdoms were in a time of relative peace, and economic expansion. But Amos was angry because in Israel the gap between rich and poor was massive and growing. It was a society where the poor and the outsider were considered less than human and expendable- were exploited and abused. One in which the rich have used their riches to burden those who will never work their way out of debt. Where the clever have used their cleverness to trick those who were not able to think as fast.

Where making a profit has become far more important than anything, anything else: than justice, than sabbath, even than God. A society focused on keeping wealth in the hands of a few and to hell with everyone else.

One in which business is business and whatever you have to do to maximize profit and power is fine: lay people off in droves so you can replace them with machines or with people working for nothing in poorer countries, demonize immigrants and people of color, have people working 2 or 3 jobs and still barely surviving-it is all fine as long as those on top stay satisfied. It is, after all, just the way things are.

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

Amos can clearly see that the health of the market, the health of the few, has become far more important than the health of all the people and God really just can't take it anymore. Time to expose this rotten core- to smash the economic idol and bury it- complete with sackcloth and ashes.

Despite how personal he sometimes seems, Amos was thinking big- far beyond any one person or company, he was taking jabs at an entire nation. He wants to know when they all agreed things have to stay the way they

are and why they think it is alright to keep profiting from a system, an economy that is repugnant to God. And it turns out Amos was right-it was an unsustainable system. Within a few years after his preaching, neighboring Assyria began a massive expansion program and by 722 BCE the Northern Kingdom had fallen- destroyed.

All of this took place some 2700 years ago, but if you are thinking it sounds like a familiar story that is because it is- the parallels are obvious. Within Amos' Israel the rich have gotten richer and the poor poorer- the gulf is widening by the year. And within our world the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer- the gulf is widening by the year. Some people eat filet mignon and drink Dom Perignon, while others forage in trash cans. Three of the richest people in the world are engaged in a contest to see who can get to space first while others can't afford a Septa pass to get to one of their three jobs. The pandemic has laid bare the vast health inequalities in this country-where the death rate for Covid between White and Black Americans is starkly different, and vaccinations have been unequally distributed-not just in American but worldwide. Many of us are contemplating a booster shot while for much of the world getting any shot at all is a dream. We are seeing how environmental racism has played out

over the years, with Black and Brown Americans suffering at disproportionate rates from diseases related to poor air quality, toxins in the water or soil, and more. And we are starting to see large migrations of people, consequences of climate destruction as the rich move on to what are literally greener pastures, while the poor stay and suffer. At core, we are alienated from each other- we have forgotten we are siblings, each and every one made in the image of God, and we have forgotten that the imbalance in which we live has tipped the scales of justice right over. In Amos' time, the Northern Kingdom was oblivious to it all- saw the nation's wealth and military power as clear signs that God was really pleased with them. Religion was going gangbusters among the wealthy who poured lots of money into their sacred rituals all the while saying dehumanizing, repulsive things about the poor, the outsider, the immigrant. Lots of people with really big bank accounts talked about thanking God for their blessings while the plain truth that a large part of the population was living in hell wasn't even on their radar.

This is the final straw for God. God seems to think it is a form of taking the holy name in vain so God taps Amos, an uneducated herdsman, a dresser of sycamores- wild figs-(as an aside, in the ancient world, a "dresser of

sycamores” was one who went around and bruised the figs to make them ripe and edible. Wild figs were not considered edible by the wealthy and fancy- so Amos was all about bruising figs so the poor could eat). At any rate, God taps Amos on the shoulder and sends him in- which Amos does with relish. He isn't fancy- he can't sling clever and witty insults- he ends up calling the rich women cows and the rich men robbers- which doesn't go over too well. He makes fun of their fancy religious assemblies and tells them their fancy offerings are a form of bribery. He reminds them of all the ways God has been wildly waving the divine arms trying to get their attention: famine, drought, blight, locusts, illness, sudden death and political upheaval. And none of it has worked. The nation's business is to stay in business and it has done just that.

So God, via Amos, delivers the scary message we just heard. The scariest part, for me, is not the darkening of the earth or even baldness. It is that those who ignore God's word will find themselves without it. They will hunt in vain for any of those Godly, good words. When they want to say something to heal the rifts between them they will look at each other with blank faces. When they take their children in their arms and try to remember the word for what they feel inside of them they won't remember

it. When they are falsely accused or charged twice what they owe they will search their brains and not remember what that is called. They will not be able to find any of the words God used to bring the world into being: Light, Good or Blessing. The only words left to them will be words that pull towards chaos, such as darkness, evil and curse. That, God says, is a real famine.

I don't know, do we think that prophecy has come true? Are we hungry for the words of the Lord? Not rhetoric, not politics wrapped up in scripture, but words that startle with their clarity, freshness, power, and love?

Maybe our ears have been so assaulted by the imposters of God that we are hard of hearing. We hear so many noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. But every once in a while, a divine word breaks through. Sometimes leaping straight out of the pages of the Bible. Sometimes from the mouth of another. I have heard God speak through all sorts of folks- drug addicts, prostitutes, people living on the streets, even occasionally clergy or heads of state.

But amidst all the noise how do we sift through the voices? How do we know which words are God's? I don't have the answer but, thanks to Jesus and Paul, I think I have some clues. First, if I hear arrogance I am fairly

sure that God is not the author of the words. God seems to have a few pretty basic themes: love, justice, endless forgiveness and perfect obedience. Since pretty much any of us who dares to talk about these things has failed to live them fully, humility should be front and center. Also, God's words almost never support our own positions, they almost always pull them out from under us so that we learn to rely on God and not our own constructs. This is not God being cruel, this is God being passionate- a passion that doesn't allow anything to stand between us and God, including our own beliefs about God.

I am also wary of coercion since that doesn't seem to be God's thing. God always allows us the freedom to choose-even when the Godly choice is screamingly obvious we get to choose the ungodly.

Finally, I listen for fear. If the goal seems to be to frighten folks into submission or into division, I am sure God isn't behind it. God's words sometimes frighten, that is true, but that is never God's goal- the goal is always abundant life and deep joy. Even Amos, scary as he was, eventually gets around to God's love and a vision of homecoming. "I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel" says God through Amos.

Perhaps the best way to fight against the famine of God's words is to

practice them- speak them- without arrogance, without fear, without coercion- but with the boldness of love for all and the vision of God's compassionate justice. Maybe even beyond speaking them we could live them- signaling to God and the world that we have heard and that we are doing our part to provide food for a world of famine.

Preached at St. Peter's Church, July 11, 2021

With thanks to the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor whose thoughts influenced this sermon