



Unequal and UnGodly

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 21, 2019*

Amos 8:1-12

This is what the Sovereign YHWH showed me: a basket of ripe figs. God said, “What do you see, Amos?” “I basket of ripe figs,” I replied. Then YHWH said to me: “The time is ripe for my people, Israel. I will no longer tolerate their atrocities. The singers in the Temple will wail that day: ‘So many corpses scattered anywhere. Hush!’”—It is the Sovereign YHWH who speaks. Listen to this, you who live off of the needy and oppress the poor of the land, you who say, “If only the New Moon were over so we could sell our grain,” and, “When Sabbath is over, we will sell our wheat charging higher prices for smaller portions, thus tilting the scales in our favor. That way, we can buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals—and even make a profit on the chaff of the wheat!”—YHWH swears by the Pride of Jacob, “I will never forget a single thing you have done.” Will not the land tremble because of this, and all who dwell in it mourn? Will the land not rise up like the Nile, rising and sinking like the river of Egypt? “That day—it is the Sovereign YHWH who speaks— I will make the sun set at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into funerals and all your happy songs into dirges. I will have your loins all in sackcloth, your heads all shaved. I will make the land mourn as one would mourn for a dead child—all of this on that bitter day! The time is coming— it is the Sovereign YHWH who speaks—when I will send famine on the land: not a famine of bread or thirst for water, but a famine of not hearing the words of YHWH.† People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east seeking revelation from YHWH, but will not find it.

Psalm 52

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| 1 You tyrant, why do you boast of wickedness *
against the godly all day long? | and root you out of the land of the living! |
| 2 You plot ruin; your tongue is like a sharpened razor, *
O worker of deception. | 6 The righteous shall see and tremble, *
and they shall laugh at the tyrant, saying, |
| 3 You love evil more than good *
and lying more than speaking the truth. | 7 “This is the one who did not take God for a refuge, *
but trusted in great wealth and relied upon wickedness.” |
| 4 You love all words that hurt, *
O you deceitful tongue. | 8 But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; *
I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever. |
| 5 Oh, that God would demolish you utterly, *
topple you, and snatch you from your dwelling, | 9 I will give you thanks for what you have done *
and declare the goodness of your Name
in the presence of the godly. |

Colossians 1:15-28

It’s true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others do so with the right intention. These latter act out of love, aware that I am here in the defense of the Good News. The others, who proclaim Christ for selfish or jealous motives, don’t care if they make my chains heavier to bear. All that matters is that in any and every way, whether from specious or genuine motives, Christ is being proclaimed! That is what brings me joy. Indeed, I will continue to rejoice in the conviction that this will result in my salvation, thanks to your prayers and the support I receive from the Spirit of Jesus Christ. I firmly trust and anticipate that I will never be put to shame for my hopes; I have full confidence that, now as always, Christ will be exalted through me, whether I live or die. For to me, “life” means Christ; hence, dying is only so much gain. If, on the other hand, I am to continue living on earth, that means productive toil for me—and I honestly don’t know which I prefer. I’m strongly attracted to both: I long to be freed from this life and to be with Christ, for that is the far better thing; yet it’s more urgent that I remain alive for your sakes. This fills me with the confidence that I will stay with you and persevere with you all, for the sake of your joy and your progress in the faith. My being with you once again should make you even prouder of me in Christ.

Conduct yourselves, then, in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ. If you do, whether I come and see you myself or hear about your behavior from a distance, it will be clear that you're standing firm in unity of spirit, and exerting yourselves with one accord for the faith of the Gospel, without being intimidated by your enemies. Standing together without fear is an indication that they will be destroyed and you will be saved. It's a divine signal that God

Luke 10:38-42

As they traveled, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him to her home. She had a sister named Mary, who seated herself at Jesus' feet and listened to his words. Martha, who was busy with all the details of hospitality, came to Jesus and said, "Rabbi, don't you care that my sister has left me all alone to do the household tasks? Tell her to help me!" Jesus replied, "Martha, Martha! You're anxious and upset about so many things, but only a few things are necessary—really only one. Mary has chosen the better part, and she won't be deprived of it."

The Bible is really an extended love story—the story of the relationship between God and people. Like any love story it has moments filled with tenderness, but it also has moments of pain and conflict, betrayal and anger. And this Divine-human love 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 speaks through people—people we call prophets. Amos, who we heard from this morning, is one of those people.

Amos was living in a society where the gap between rich and poor was massive. 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 that is 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 this passage may seem, 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.

All of this took place some 2700 years ago in Israel, 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. People have winter houses, summer houses, even spring houses, while others have no houses at all. Some people eat filet mignon and drink Dom Perignon, while others, on a really good day, eat instant potato flakes. Some people, those who are not “one of us”—the alien, the immigrant, are not even really considered to be people. The government is bent on widening the gulf—both economic, and personal—intent on keeping the people divided. At core, the people are alienated from each other—they have forgotten they are siblings and that the imbalance in which they live has tipped the scales of justice right over.

Meanwhile, others see the nation's wealth and military power as clear signs that God is really pleased with Israel. Religion is going gangbusters among the wealthy, the dominant, who pour lots of money into their sacred rituals all the while saying dehumanizing, repulsive things about the poor, the outsider, the immigrant—pretty much anyone who threatens or confronts them and their world view. Lots of people in really big houses talk about thanking God for their blessings while the plain truth that a large part of the population is living in hell isn'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, 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, through 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, not the constant declarations of the superiority of one group over another, 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, 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 should be 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 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. So what to do in a time of lots of ungodly speech and action—in a time of famine? First, we need to remember the God words—speak them to ourselves in the mirror every morning, teach them to our children. We need to remember them and pass them on.

We need to speak God's word of love—without arrogance, without fear, without coercion—but with boldness of love for all and the vision of God's compassionate justice. And 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 be food for a world of famine.