

## Summer Fruit and The Oracles of Doom

-Summer Sermons should be 10 minutes

I told them they'd be disappointed today as somehow we are jumping right into Amos and how could we possibly sum it all up in 10 minutes.

But they said they believed in me and would give me a signal when we hit the 10-minute mark.

-The world's 10 richest men are: Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Bernard Arnault and family, Bill Gates, Larry Ellison, Larry Page, Sergey Brin, Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Ballmer and Warren Buffet.

Did you know that from the start of the pandemic to the fall last year the world's 10 richest men grew their wealth from \$700bn to \$1.5TN.

ElonMusk's fortune growing by more than 1,000%.

Now I don't know about you but something feels wrong to me when we've seen so many people adversely affected during this time, losing their jobs, having to rely on government support, having to scramble to find ways to keep their business going. And while the world struggles to find a way through one of the most significant challenges of our time, the richest men in the world thrive and amass even more wealth.

Something just doesn't seem right about it. And you could say, well maybe it's jealousy. Maybe the thing that doesn't seem right about it is that I'm not one of those richest men and I'd really love to be at the top of the heap. Maybe. Maybe owning Hawaii islands and being able to fly into space would alleviate the feeling that something isn't right about all this.

But I'm not sure any of us who try to follow the way of Jesus would ever be able to justify this kind of profiteering while so many in the world have been struggling to survive.

If you've been paying attention through the lectionary and the messages of the past weeks there's an interesting thread that God's word is weaving. The Holy Father's of the preachers guild: Gary, Dave, and Ron, have all

opened up passages to us that challenge us to expand our vision, from beyond our tribe, beyond our nation, beyond our family, to see every person that God brings into our lives as someone that we can show mercy and love to.

And it's that thread of mercy to others that leads us into Amos this morning. Amos is the first book of the twelve, or what has come to be known as the minor prophets. But make no mistake, their message was not minor or unimportant they were only described this way because of the size of their texts compared to the lengthier works of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In fact, the writing of the twelve minor prophets were all collected onto one scroll and so were come to be known as the book (scroll) of the twelve.

Amos is called by God to leave his home in Judah the southern kingdom and travel into the Northern kingdom of Israel to deliver his message. He is called a shepherd but there are indications that he wasn't just taking care of someone else's sheep. He may have been fairly well off himself owning land with sycamore trees and harvesting figs.

It begs the question, what was happening in Israel that would compel you to leave your comfortable home and travel up to tell them about Summer fruit and the oracles of doom?

It sounds to me like he got something stuck in his craw. Are you familiar with the phrase - We used to have this expression back on the farm - "Something got stuck in his craw?"

It's like something was happening that was so offensive and disagreeable that Amos just couldn't swallow it anymore.

So he heads up to Bethel and starts by drawing the people of Israel in. He starts talking about how God is going to judge all the nations around them. He knows that if he jumps right into Amos 8 and blasts them with "THE END HAS COME!" no one will pay attention

The end has come-

Maybe we should have said the bridge is out.”

You can imagine the crowd gathering around to hear Amos’ message and agreeing that these other nations do need to be judged. They start nodding and clapping, maybe even cheering for the judgment on Damascus, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Gaza. And then he calls for the judgment on Judah. Some in the crowd might recognize the trajectory here and see that what Amos is doing is getting closer and closer geographically to Israel and finally in chapter 2 he lets them have it:

Amos 2:6-7a

“Thus says the Lord:  
For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment,<sup>[c]</sup>  
because they sell the righteous for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth  
and push the afflicted out of the way;”

Here we see what was stuck in Amos’ craw - what God was calling him to reveal to the nation is that their prosperity was built on the backs of the poor and their luxury came at the expense of the most vulnerable.

Two practices, in particular, are called out by Amos:

1. The first was the practice of debt slavery. In trading societies it was common to barter and trade for goods that you needed from your neighbour. If you needed cattle you might promise to give an equivalent value of your wheat for cattle you need. But your harvest may not be ready and you need the cattle now. So the person you were trading with might say, give me your sandals as a promissory note. You’re confident you’re going to have a great harvest and so you hand over your sandals and go back to your fields but then there is a drought. The harvest doesn’t come and now your business partner demands that you give them one of your family members as payment. Debt Slavery - “they sell the needy for a pair of sandals”.
2. The second practice was the way that the poor were denied legal representation. Basically, the wealthy controlled the courts and had

the silver to affect justice. It was weighted toward those who had money and ignored the poor who desperately were seeking justice but couldn't afford to bribe.

Amos condemns the way that Israel has amassed wealth and riches for the powerful while neglecting the most vulnerable. He points the finger and asks, "Is this the inheritance of the family that was once denied justice and enslaved in Egypt The family that God rescued from oppression and slavery?"

No! Amos says, God called you to be a blessing to all the nations and you aren't living up to the calling. You continue to offer sacrifices and worship all the while ignoring the poor. That's why God says he hates your festivals, and despises your worship.

In Chapter 5 Amos calls out

chapter 5:23+24 "Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like water

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

It's not hard to see how this tradition that we inherit, from the Exodus to the prophets to Jesus inspired people like Martin Luther King Jr. to call for justice and righteousness in the face of a society that pushed aside and trampled on people's human dignity.

And what a challenge for us to think about today and each day as we gather for worship. How might God consider the noise of our songs and the melody of our harps if we don't also seek justice and righteousness?

Amos' message isn't pretty but he continues to share with the nation what judgment will look like. He refers to this as the day of the Lord: He forecasts that another powerful nation will come and decimate their cities and take the people away into exile.

### Oracles of Doom:

He describes this coming day of judgement with some powerful images. In one vision he sees Israel devastated by a locust swarm, in another, they are consumed with a scorching fire, in the final vision God destroys the temple at Bethel and the whole earth heaves, it rises and swells, and the foundations of Israel have been turned upside down. This is interesting because at the beginning of Amos we are told that he brought the word of the Lord to Israel 2 years before the earthquake. Archaeological Geologists have dated this massive quake to about 760BCE about 40 years before the Assyrians would invade and conquer Israel.

Now we finally get to our main passage. Are we up on 10 minutes yet?

What stands out to me in this passage is that in contrast to the locust swarm, scorching fire, and massive earthquake, the basket of summer fruit seems quite pleasant. I mean if you had to choose your oracles of doom wouldn't you go for the summer fruit? Of course you would. There's no choice here. But as we read through we realize that Amos is drawing us in, tempting us to taste and see what God has for us only to realize the sweetness of the fruit is starting to turn.

Amos uses a play on words here. The Hebrew words for Summer Fruit and the words for END sound very similar: It's like he is saying here come and have a Coke, Oh whoops now you're going to Choke! Or, maybe closer might be: Do you see this basket of Dates, The Date of Judgment is also here!

Okay I can tell your suspect of my poetry, but listen to this poem from the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney:

### **Blackberry-Picking**

BY SEAMUS HEANEY

Late August, given heavy rain and sun  
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.

At first, just one, a glossy purple clot  
 Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.  
 You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet  
 Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it  
 Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for  
 Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger  
 Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots  
 Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.  
 Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills  
 We trekked and picked until the cans were full,  
 Until the tinkling bottom had been covered  
 With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned  
 Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered  
 With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.  
 But when the bath was filled we found a fur,  
 A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.  
 The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush  
 The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.  
 I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair  
 That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
 Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

Amos also draws us into seeing how the sweet pleasures enjoyed by the nation are coming to an end. They don't last and the time is ripe for judgement.

And finally, we see one of the worst consequences of God's judgment:

Amos 8:11-12 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.

Remember a couple of weeks ago, Pastor Dave shared that as Jesus' sent his disciples into Samaria that they would "see what you see and hear what you hear."?

This is the great blessing AND the greatest oracle of doom - that if we don't pay attention to how we are treating the most vulnerable if we don't continue to seek justice, to love mercy, to work for greater equity, we may experience the famine of God's word and presence in our lives.

God have mercy on us.

Generosity and Justice

### **THE LANDLORD**

Early one morning a man turned up at the house of his minister in tears, saying, "Please, can you help. A kind and considerate family in the area is in great trouble. The husband recently lost his job, and the wife cannot work due to health problems. They have three young children to look after, and the man's mother lives with them because she is sick and needs constant care. They have no money at the moment, and if they don't pay the rent by tomorrow morning the landlord is going to kick them all onto the street, even though it's the middle of winter."

The minister replied, "That's terrible. Of course, we will help. I will go get some money from the church fund to pay their rent. Can I ask, how do you know them?"

To which the man replied, "Oh, I'm the landlord."

Youth Trip - man dragging a woman by her hair - Brad got out behind me. Something in my Craw - - >

It's easy to point fingers at the world's most wealthiest with judgement and think that we might be more charitable if we were in their position. It's also easy to give in to apathy that we can't really affect some of the greater principalities and powers that structure our modern lives. And it's almost impossible to imagine how we might find real solutions to bring justice to our most poor and vulnerable, those dealing with mental health, our homeless, and those on the margins of our world.

It's a daunting challenge. But in a way, all it requires is that we see and hear what Amos, the prophets, Jesus, and Jesus' disciples saw and heard. If we can retain our ability to see and hear God and see and hear our neighbour we will be compelled to respond where God calls us, to move for Justice, to work for Righteousness, to love Mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Thanks Be to God.