

“A Famine of Hearing”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42

Richard E. Otty  
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I've been watching the speaker list for the upcoming conventions of the two major political parties – who will speak, who has declined to speak, who has not been invited. So far, it seems clear the prophet Amos will not be speaking at either one. That's probably wise for those planning, for the one thing you don't want is for someone to end their convention speech with the words, “And as we move forward, may God curse America.”

That's what Amos dared say over two millennia ago, though it was, “God curse Israel.” And for those who heard it, particularly those in power, it had the same impact as if spoken at one of the upcoming conventions. And who wants to hear that at a pep rally?

Yet, friends, our lesson this morning teaches us, if you truly want “tell it like it is,” listen for prophets with God's agenda, not politicians with their own to which God becomes an attachment. Amos is speaking for God, and Will Willimon suggests “one way you can tell the difference between a true and living God and a dead and fake god is that a false god will never tell you anything that will make you angry and uncomfortable!” [Willimon, William, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), p. 248]

As we heard last week, Amos brought God's judgment on both King Jereboam's palace and Priest Amaziah's temple. This morning, Amos and God step into the marketplace, where not only the rich, but the middle class will be castigated for the ways in which they trample on the needy. God is cursing Israel. Will Israel be wise enough to listen? Is it too late?

[Amos 8:1-12]

[#1] This is what God showed me – a basket of summer fruit. God asked,

[#2] *“Amos, what do you see?”*

[#1] “A basket of summer fruit.”

[#2] *“The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day, the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”*

[#1] 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.”**

[#1] God has sworn by the pride of Jacob:

[#2] *“Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. 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? On that day, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. 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 child, and the end of it like a bitter day.*

*The time is surely coming, 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 God.**

[#1] They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of God,

**but they shall not find it.”**

From a scene on Israel’s national stage, we now move into a more pastoral setting of Jesus visiting the household of two sisters. Our Gospel reading is the familiar story of two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha welcomes Jesus into her household and prepares a meal, while her sister Mary sits at Jesus’ feet listening to him teach. The pained look on the Martha portrayed on the bulletin cover captures the words she will soon speak, though we have no idea the identity of the extra two persons in what Luke offers as a scene with just three characters.

Our lesson is often wrongfully portrayed as a duel between listeners and doers, an attentive Mary listening to Jesus teaching, and a busy, flustered Martha trying to prepare a meal for the one she will call “Lord.” Women and men alike will often align themselves as a Mary or Martha type personality. The story turns on the fact that Martha approaches Jesus out of perceived frustration, and takes exception to her sister not helping her.

It is not an uncommon feeling, whether in one’s own household, or in preparing for or cleaning up after a church supper where some come only to enjoy the meal and program, and then leave. The church is dependent and grateful for its Martha’s, and so will have trouble with this passage if we regard it an affront to those who are doers, or hear it as uplifting passive listening over deeds of service and responsibilities for hospitality.

As we hear the five verses of our Gospel lesson, I would encourage you to set aside the notion that Mary and Martha are being pitted against each other, or that listening is set above doing as a measure of faithfulness. Instead, I invite us to hear Jesus’ response to Martha as being about her being “distracted by many things.” When one is distracted, it is hard to focus.

Let me also note some cultural norms that would cause first century ears to perk up. First, we expect the Mary and Martha of this lesson are the same sisters of Lazarus who appear in the Gospel of John; yet, Luke specifically writes Jesus is welcomed by Martha into her house, not that of her male sibling or father. Second, Mary’s position of sitting and learning from a teacher was one normally reserved for men in first century culture. Mary’s natural place was, one might say, “in the kitchen”, with her sister Martha; yet, if Mary had been in the kitchen, we would not have the Mary and Martha story. Luke 10:38-42:

<sup>38</sup>Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup>She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup>But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." <sup>41</sup>But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup>there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

At first glance, the connection between our two readings seemed distant to me. Then I began to picture Amos' image of the basket of summer fruit in Martha's kitchen, as preparations were made to show hospitality for Jesus and his disciples. I could imagine Martha thinking, "I'd sure like to just sit and listen to Jesus, but who is going to slice the pineapple, peel the pomegranates, and chop the figs to set out for our guests; if I had a little help from Mary, then we both could sit at Jesus' feet." At the very least Martha would have appreciated some sign Mary recognized she could use some help. Yet, again, the lesson is not meant as a conflict between the two sisters, nor does it condemn Martha's attention to the gift of hospitality.

What we may miss is Martha's breach of the etiquette of hospitality when she asks her guest, Jesus, to correct her sister's failure to be busy with the tasks at hand. Today, we would call that triangling, when we ask another to intervene rather than speak to the person directly. Jesus notes how Martha's many distractions and worries have caused her to lose focus on what is important.

It is this identification of distraction and focus, busyness and listening that provides another connection between our two lessons, but let's not yet leave that the basket of summer fruit.

"What do you see, Amos?" "A basket of summer fruit," is the response, and we envision a tray of chilled watermelon slices, deep red strawberries, fresh-picked blueberries and raspberries, the fruit of vine and garden, homegrown and fresh. As enticing as the image of summer fruit may be to our ears, the clear implication for Amos is this is the last fruit of the season, the end of God's harvest, and likely for years to come. "Enjoy it while you can," Amos declares, "because that is all you will receive. God is cutting you off. In fact, you are cursed."

Yet, why should they believe Amos? Amos was what we would call a carpetbagger; a resident of the southern kingdom of Judah, doing his prophetic preaching in the northern kingdom of Israel. Last week Priest Amaziah told him to pack his bags and go back home. Why should they listen to this southerner, this foreigner? History would seem to confirm they did not, as the kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians.

Beyond his outsider status, the other reason folks would cringe at Amos' prophecy, and shun it being God's word to them, is Amos' words touched a nerve few American politicians are willing to touch. He did not preach about social values, or a declining morality by pointing to the clothes people wore, the music to which they listened, or even the religion they professed; no, Amos dared question the economics of the sacred middle class. Yes, Amos forthrightly condemned the rich and powerful, and those who had both summer and winter houses, yet it was a merchant class that bought and sold grain, and worked the weights on the scales to their favor. On this latter, if you ever go through the self-checkout at the grocery store, and weigh your summer fruit on the scale, you will be asked if it is in a plastic bag; if so, the slight weight of that bag is tared out, and deducted from what you will be charged. The money changers Amos condemns would be like going through the checkout lane and having a cashier press down on the scale, adding extra weight, as your summer fruit is weighed. Of course, the reality is, one would not dare do so to the rich and powerful, or the servants they send to buy their food. It is the poor and powerless who have no voice to object who are cheated. Yet, it is not simply the everyday shenanigans of the market place that provokes God's anger.

The sole measure of God's anger is how such actions affect the poor and needy. Again, for the most part today, American politics uplifts the "middle class" to royalty, and any advocacy for the poor seems to be a side conversation, at best. "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land," sets the core concern of God in these prophetic words. God saw the poor cheated into indebtedness, allowing others to actually buy them, and own them. In fact, it was lawful. The problem was, people failed to understand how God linked justice and legality; how something could be technically lawful but faithfully wrong. We call it ethics. As Will Willimon writes, a part of Israel's greatness was they held themselves "accountable to something higher and more substantive than their own opinions." [Ibid., p. 244.]

The unsettling part of reading the Hebrew prophets is not the condemnation of particular individuals, or the pointing of fingers of blame at guilty parties, but the overarching understanding of communal responsibility. Thus, even if you were not directly pilfering a few cents from the needy on each market transaction, or did not have enough silver to actually buy a person as a servant, one was still culpable as a member of the community. It is at that point this passage touches home for me, knowing I have not been a consistent advocate for those with few resources or voice.

One problem with folks taking Amos' warnings seriously was things were going well, and indeed, the famine that is proclaimed by God is not one of a lack of bread and water, but a famine of hearing, and specifically, a famine of hearing the word of God. But, who cares as long as life was good for you? For Israel, and for the Church, and dare I suggest in the ideals of our own nation, faithfulness is to be measured by caring for the whole community, not just the wellbeing of oneself or one's small group.

In her book, When God is Silent, Barbara Brown Taylor writes of famine and our hunger for God suggesting, “Our problem is not too few rations, but too many. The proof that we are in the midst of a famine of the Word are the suffocating piles of our own dead words that rise up around us on every side. It is because they do not nourish us that we require so many of them. It takes thousands of words, coming at us every moment, to distract us from the terrible silence within. [Taylor, Barbara Brown, When God is Silent, (Boston: Cowley, 1998), p. 29)] So much, but so empty.

I need to insert here that last evening, we listened to a portion of an almost twenty year old Prairie Home Companion, and there was a segment sponsored by Swanson’s self-storage. We know about self-storage, the growing industry where people can put all the possessions they cannot fit in their homes. But Swanson self-storage is different. It is self-storage, storage for oneself. You rent it and live in it, away from all news and distractions for a week, or two, or four. The door is opened and you go and pick a shelf – any open shelf – and lie down and rest and stay. And it made me think, what if I turned off everything for a month? I wonder if that could be what Jesus is commending; what might help us avoid the suffocation of piles of dead words.

When we recognize we are distracted with the Martha tasks of living;  
 when we become too self-satisfied or content;  
 when our own opinions become more substantive than our communal responsibilities;  
 when we become comfortable with any privilege of gender, race, or class we have inherited;  
 when as a church we find ourselves overwhelmed by facilities and finances;  
 when we sense in our soul a complicity with injustice;

these all might be signals sent from God we are experiencing a famine of hearing, and that we need a “time out” with Jesus. These might serve as both a warning it is time to pause and an invitation it is time to listen, with Mary, for God’s word from the likes of prophets and the teachings of the master called Jesus.

We need not fear taking such times out to relieve our famine by sitting at the feet of Jesus; for even if tempted to linger at such an oasis, we know it was never Jesus’ intent for Mary to remain seated on the floor. Yet, perhaps our fear is Jesus will tell Mary, and us, to go out and speak the words of Amos.