

“Amos: Fresh Fruit, Dead Bodies and Sandals”

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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church

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This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit. He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the Lord said to me,

“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,”

says the Lord God;

*“the dead bodies shall be many,
cast out in every place. Be silent!”*

*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.”

Those of you who pay way too close attention, might have noticed that I have fallen into a preaching pattern each year during the hard winter months. For most of the year, my preaching selections are informed by *The New Common Lectionary*, a three-year schedule of readings that include a Psalm, another Old Testament reading, an Epistle reading, and a Gospel passage for each Sunday of the year. As a rule, I find it a good discipline for making sure I don't just gravitate to my favorite passages over and over. But one of the limitations of preaching the Lectionary is that we do not get the arc of a particular book – the whole sweep of that author's purpose and style. So, for the last several Januarys and Februarys, I have preached through Genesis, or Colossians, or Exodus so that we get the sweep of a particular book.

This year, I'm doing a similar thing for seven weeks, but instead of preaching from one book, I'm preaching across seven of the Minor Prophets. But, rather than preach in the order they appear in scripture, I am preaching them in chronological order, in the order that their writing

would have occurred in Hebrew history. This means that the continuing narrative arc will be the nearly 3 centuries of God's plan of salvation that our Minor Prophets span.

Not only do the Minor Prophets make up 3 centuries of our faith story, but they constitute 66 chapters of our Holy Scriptures that usually go ignored. The 3-year Lectionary only includes 12 passages from those 66 chapters. So, at some point we need to hear these guys speak. I have a commitment to proclaiming, over-time, the whole of the biblical witness. So, for the next 7 weeks these guys will become our preachers.

One more word of intro - "Minor" Prophet is not really a great way to reference this group. I'll keep using the phrase because it is common, but "minor" sounds like they didn't have a good enough batting average to make it to the majors – like these were the prophets who were just not as good, not as influential as the others. That is surely not the case. "Minor" simply refers to the size of the book that bears their name. Compared to Isaiah or Jeremiah, these are tiny books, but their important stories shaped our redemption history.

Intro aside – today, our first preacher is Amos – a wealthy, but uneducated sheep-breeder and owner of fig orchards. He farmed about 12 miles south of the Northern territory, but Amos had a vision from God about the preaching he was to go up there and proclaim. The vision from God started with this question:

- *“Amos, what do you see?”*
- *And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.”*

A basket of summer fruit looks lush and satisfying, but it has been cut off from its source and soon, it will rot and die. That is exactly where Israel finds itself.

By all appearance, Israel looks like a basket of summer fruit, luscious and sweet. The upper classes were living in opulence. There was peace in the land because the Assyrians were the dominant power in the region, but they had their hands full. Armies were advancing on them from Asia Minor, so the military attention was given to that border skirmish leaving Israel's king, Jeroboam II, room to give his attention to domestic matters. He expanded trade and commerce and so when Amos wrote in about the year 760 BC, the Northern Kingdom was in a time of glorious prosperity.

So, what's the problem, what's Amos so riled up about? Why is he yelling at the chosen people of God? First, let me say a word in defense of all the prophets by way of a Halloween tale.

On Halloween this year, Melissa and I went up to Dacula, so we could go Trick-or-Treating with our 4-year-old grandson. He was head-to-toe in a yellow, Bumble Bee Transformer, costume. Anyway, and I don't know how long this agreement has been going on, but as long as I can remember, when Haley, my daughter, says, "red light", Cooper stops in his tracks. It is funny to watch – anywhere, anytime – walking along the mall, if Cooper hears the words, "red light", he just freezes. Anyway, it was Halloween, we were in the front yard. Somebody went back in for a bathroom stop before Trick-or-Treating, we were negotiating who would stay back to give out candy, when Cooper the Transformer, ran toward the street and an oncoming car. Loudly and

furiously, Haley yelled at the top of her lungs, “*Red Light*”. It scared us all – but Cooper stopped, and he came crying back to his mother because he knew, by her tone, that he had done something to upset her.

The point is, sometimes, loving parents yell. Haley yelled a loud warning about what could kill – not to be mean but motivated by a clear, and urgent love. So much has been made of the Old Testament’s prophets and their language of smiting and judgement and it misses the point that their words from God are loud warnings from a loving God who knows and wants what is best for us.

And the yelling, loving, message of Amos is that this prosperity of the upper class has been at the exploitation of the poor and that God has had enough of it.

The chosen people of God were to be modeling the values of the Holy One and yet they were acting like any other selfish people and taking advantage of those without power.

- For one, the helpless were being denied justice in the court system – Amos says, “...*you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.*”¹
- And, the rich were living extravagantly with no regard for the poor – “...*who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs...who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!*”² (The people of Israel)
- And from our scripture for today, the capitalists were cheating in the marketplace, eager for their holy days to be over so they could make another buck – “*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...*”³

Amos has come to declare that God has had enough. You see, Israel is God’s elect. Israel has been set apart to mediate the message of God’s love to the world. Israel is to be different from the warring, grabbing, selfish traders of the rest of the world. They are God’s chosen people. God calls for love and obedience and forgiveness and justice – and Israel’s recent report card has an “*F*” in each subject. The culture has turned to greed, stopped their practices of worship and they are acting like any other nation.

Israel is running to the street in a yellow Transformer costume, headed right for danger, and Amos yells, “*Red light!*” Stop.

It is incumbent on the chosen ones of God to be obedient to God’s commands of righteousness and justice and worship.

¹ Amos 5:12 NRSV

² Amos 6: 4-6 NRSV

³ Amos 8: 5-6 NRSV

Why is Amos in a bad mood? One preacher's answer: *"Because the health of the market has become a higher good than the health of the people and God cannot stand it anymore."*⁴

Usually, when we talk about sin in the church, we are facing the very personal ways that we betray God's call on our lives. We look in the mirror at our own selfishness in ways that hopefully lead to repentance and to a commitment to live as a more loving version of ourselves. But the Minor Prophets are yelling at an entire culture. We not only face our own private sins, but Amos and the others are asking us to widen the lens, scan out and look at the systems that we participate in that are unfair to the most vulnerable among us.

And here is where the preaching task gets slippery. Most preaching that claims to be "prophetic", I find politically offensive. At this turn in the sermon, many preachers will take on a particular political issue and preaches a partisan word of "prophetic" reform.

This is the touchy part of preaching from the Minor Prophets, they are condemning the practices of the culture and declaring God's anger. But we need to make an important distinction. In Amos' day, the chosen ones, the people who were to work out and model God's redemptive hope, were the Israelites. They were a people group bound by politic and culture and national identity. In God's new covenant, the message of God's salvation has been entrusted to the Church, not a nation. Sure, Christians should exercise our voting conscience and work for political outcomes that are just, but if Amos is preaching an angry word at God's community, this is not a sermon preached to the government, this is a sermon to the Church.

Most of what I hear that is characterized as a "prophetic" sermon is just a political sermon that aligns with already held voting bias and favorite news channel the preacher's congregation. Affirming people's bias and dressing down the culture to a room shouting "Amen" is not prophetic preaching. The preaching of Amos should disturb us. Amos does his work when he gets in our bread basket.

We are the chosen people of God – you and me. We are the audience of this angry sermon. We are the basket of ripe fruit, cut off from the source of our renewal. We are the ones Amos is calling to task for ignoring and exploiting the disadvantaged.

Bruce Hornsby sings,
*"The man in the silk suit hurries by
 As he catches the poor old lady's eyes
 Just for fun he says, "Get a job."*⁵

And in our worst moments, we know it is us – not them. It does not move the needle of justice for us to rail at the culture, our task is to consider if there is any part of our lives that need reclaiming in this area. We are the Church, God's model of redemption.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, p. 180

⁵ Bruce Hornsby and the Range, *The Way It Is*

- Amos accused the people of God of denying justice – Remember, “...*you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.*”⁶
Have you ever pushed aside the needy at the gate?
- And, the rich were living extravagantly with no regard for the poor – “...*who lie on beds of ivory...who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!*”⁷
This shines a hard light on our financial priorities. Are we not grieved over the ruin of Joseph? How do we care for the poor with our overage and excess?
- And from our scripture for today, “*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...*”⁸

Has somebody at work ever asked you to tilt the scales, fudge the report, pad the billable hours? Are we, the representatives of God’s good order, God’s active love, are we acting like the larger culture or standing firm as the chosen ones of God to be obedient to God’s commands of righteousness and justice and worship?

In seminary, I served a small First Baptist Church in a small town in North Carolina – population 1003. Our church was small like the town, but we had the movers and shakers – the mayor, the business owners were all mostly in our congregation. The little town had barely enough size and financial strength to support a small country club with a nine-hole golf course, four tennis courts and a pool. When the new doctor at the hospital in nearby Henderson bought a house in our town and applied for membership at the struggling little club, he was denied. His last name was Patel and the club had never admitted a dark-skinned member before.

Unjust systems are still with us. Amos has come to declare that God has had enough of it.

⁶ Amos 5:12 NRSV

⁷ Amos 6: 4-6 NRSV

⁸ Amos 8: 5-6 NRSV