

On the Receiving End

Amos 8:1-12; Col 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

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Church of the New Covenant

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Last week we had a tantalizing glimpse of one of the great figures in Israel's prophetic tradition. A "herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees" named Amos was harshly condemning the social injustices and political corruption he observed in Israel. We heard that God had given him a vision of a plumb line that showed the people and their leaders were out of alignment with the standards for living God had given them.

We heard that Amaziah the priest reported him to king Jeroboam, saying Amos was engaged in acts of sedition against him. Then, presumably at the king's command, he ordered Amos to leave the country and return to his homeland, Judah. "Go prophesy there, and never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary!"

But Amos, compelled by the Spirit of God, continues today with another of his vivid prophetic images and his forecast of destruction. He sees the Lord standing before him with a "basket of summer fruit."

One may wonder what a benign, even pleasant image like a basket of fruit may have to do with impending doom. Around here such a basket might contain oranges, strawberries, Georgia peaches, grapefruit, cantaloupe, apples and grapes. In Israel, at that time, it would probably have held dates, figs, olives, apricots, perhaps some plums or mulberries, grapes, and sycamore fruit.

So here's your factoid of the day: Amos called himself a "dresser of sycamores." The Middle-eastern sycamore is not related to the one in North America. It is a member of the fig family. But its fruit is bitter, very unpleasant to eat, unless it is bruised, scratched or punctured just before it ripens. Then it sweetens rapidly. So, someone had to climb the trees and "dress" the fruit. Hence an opportunity for a moonlighting shepherd.

But why would a fruit basket symbolize disaster? The clue to this is in the original language. The Hebrew word for “basket of summer fruit” is *qayitz*. The word for “end” – as in “The end has come upon my people Israel” – is *qetz*. It’s a pun. An English-speaking prophet might employ the image of a lion cradling a jug of red wine, saying “I am about to go for the people’s jugular vein.”

The Israel of Amos’ time, about 750 BCE, was enjoying a period of unprecedented peace and prosperity. Their most dangerous enemies, Syria and Assyria, were too exhausted fighting with each other to be much of a threat. Israel’s king, Jeroboam II, began a program of territorial expansion that was challenged only by the king of Judah, whom he soundly whipped, reducing Judah to a vassal state. Jeroboam controlled the trade routes from Syria and Arabia through his territory, and his nation profited handsomely through commerce with the enterprising Phoenicians. Wealth poured in to the cities of Israel.

It doesn’t take too hard a look to see similarities between Israel of that time and the United States of our own. We are still riding the wave of prosperity that began to rise in the period following World War II. Although we endured a rather nervous spell during the Cold War, and we recently sustained a demoralizing terrorist attack on 9/11/2001, our borders and our shores have not faced a substantial threat in over fifty years. Life in this country, and in much of the West, is very good.

The people of Amos’s time saw their comfort and wealth as signs of God’s favor toward them. So why would God issue a prophetic call to a country bumpkin from the country to upset the people – and their king – by ranting about impending doom?

Here is what Amos saw happening. The wealthy “trampled on the needy” and “brought to ruin the poor of the land.” They were “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.” He cried out, “You turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground! ... You who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.”

The author Bernard Anderson noted, “An oppressive social pyramid grew up, with the royal courtiers and the merchant class at the top, and the great mass of people ground into poverty at the bottom.” (*Understanding the Old Testament*, p 288)

Do you remember the crime King Ahab committed, when he had Naboth killed so he could steal his vineyard? This was happening on a broad scale throughout the nation.

Lack of concern for the needy, love for money, and cheating for material gain were the sins of which Israel was guilty. By using unethical business practices the wealthy were bankrupting the poor and forcing these helpless people to sell themselves as slaves. The unscrupulous rich were buying these slaves for the price of a pair of sandals! The poor were sold wheat which was inferior and not fit for human consumption. The wealthy wore an outward garment of religion but their piety was insincere. While going through the motions of keeping the holy feasts and passovers, businessmen couldn't wait for the special religious days to be over so that they could return to making money. The greedy merchants cheated the needy by making the bushel container smaller, or by using false measuring weights on the scales.

The summer fruit was so ripe that it was beginning to rot. Rancid juices were oozing through the bottom of the basket. The fruit was going to have to be thrown onto the garbage heap. Amos declared that the nation of Israel would soon be on the receiving end of a terrible wrath.

How do we stand according to God's standards for social justice? It is fairly obvious that record is far from perfect. We don't have to look far to see that as a nation, and as members of the global community, we are far from measuring up to God's standards.

Does this mean that God is about to cause the land to tremble, to cause the sun to go down at noon, to bring destruction upon all our cities, where "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place"?

I do not believe that is the way God acts. That idea is part of an ancient worldview where people attributed natural disasters, military victories or military catastrophes, periods of prosperity or periods of famine to the direct action of some god. We have come to realize that hurricanes or earthquakes are things that simply happen – terrible as they are – with neither wrath nor vengeance, that cancer is not a punishment or a test but simply a bad disease, and that military successes are won by human beings, whether evil or righteous.

God does not intend for us to be on the receiving end of wrath or destruction. Rather, God calls us to live and to proclaim God's intent for human life. Injustice surely brings about its own consequences. It is the cause of much human hardship and spiritual agony. It is also the fuel for the fires of revolution. Injustice must be addressed forcefully by people of faith.

To do that requires a tender hand to minister to those who suffer pain, a strong back to minister to those who require our aid, a generous heart to minister to those who suffer economic deprivation, and a courageous prophetic voice to right the injustices in this modern but no-so-enlightened world.

Jesus did not come to cast dead bodies into the streets and turn the songs of our worship into wailings of grief. Jesus did not come to shake the land or cause it "to rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again." Jesus came not to take life but to give life.

The gift to us from the Gospel today is the reminder that our life of faith-in-action also requires time at the feet of Jesus. Martha is not a terrible person for working so hard to provide hospitality. But all her work amounts to nothing if she cannot also toss her apron upon the stack of dirty dishes, leave it there for a while, and take a place beside her sister at the feet of Jesus. He didn't come to her house to be waited on. He came there to give to them and all the others who showed up that day the gift of his healing presence.

In Christ "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." God wants us to be on the receiving end of this fullness. There are many things we are called to *do* as the community of faith known as Church of the New Covenant. One of them is to sit and listen, to make ourselves receptive to this marvelous fullness.

Opportunities abound. Gathering here on Sunday mornings is, of course, one of them.

Listen.

Meeting with one another to discuss a book or a movie is one.

Listen.

Finding some time on our own, even a few minutes carved out of a busy day, to read a few lines of a psalm, to say a prayer for the needs of our congregation or for the needs of our world, or simply to sit still, is an opportunity to receive the marvelous fullness of God's love.

Sit. Listen.

Soon we will be called upon -- again -- to act.