

Living in a Bitter Day

July 17, 2022

Amos 8:1-12

¹ This is what the Lord God showed me: a basket of summer fruit. ² 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 spare them no longer. ³ The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day,” says the Lord God; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”

⁴ Hear this, you who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵ 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 smaller and the shekel heavier and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶ buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” ⁷ The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. ⁸ 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?

⁹ On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰ 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 son and the end of it like a bitter day. ¹¹ 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.

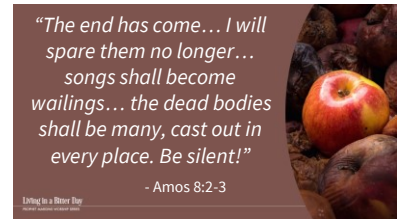
¹² They shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it.



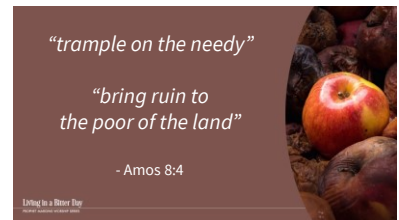
Today we continue to walk with Amos. Today we are called to look beyond the close and familiar, beyond our friends and family and neighborhood, perhaps beyond ourselves too, looking past our own boundaries. In our passage from Amos 8, God invites the prophet to look deeper, to look past the surface to see and address the deeper root causes of suffering, of hurting, of injustice, of oppression, of inequity. In turn, we will be asked to do the same, to see what is underneath or behind our excess, our wealth, our comfort. As we do so, let us pray...

Today we find ourselves in the middle of summer. Outside the world is full of life. Gardens are bountiful and filled with tasty and colorful vegetables and fruits. Just out back, the church garden and the community garden plots are bursting with life. You might already know this – I love gardening and eating fresh produce. I love preparing the dirt and planting the seeds and young plants. I love seeing those first shoots come up and I watch with anticipation for the blossoms to become more. It is wonderful to have a bounty of fresh food to choose from. Yet sometimes there can be too much. If we're not careful, if we're not paying attention, then our produce can stay on the vine too long and can begin to decay and rot. We might see just the opposite of the reality of this image. We think the bowl is full of ripe and delicious apples, when the reality is different. Turn with me to Amos 8 as God reveals a deeper truth to the prophet.

God shows Amos a basket of summer fruit and asks, “Amos, *what do you see?*” Well, he sees what you and I see - a basket of fruit. Amos, being a herdsman and tree trimmer, is familiar with nature and crops and such. But God takes a 180. In response to Amos only taking a quick glance, to only seeing the surface, only seeing what is close to him, God says, “*The end has come... I will spare them no longer... songs shall become wailings... the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!*” Amos thought they were looking at and talking about a bowl of fruit. Continuing on, though, we hear why God is so upset.



In verse 4, God begins by directing anger at those who “*trample on the needy*” and at those who “*bring to ruin the poor of the land.*” God is feeling how you and I would feel. If



we see someone taking advantage of or mistreating a needy or poor or helpless person, our hackles rise up. Don't they? Like God, we too become upset. Pushing on, we get the details in verses 5 and 6. First, in verse 5 we read about the wealthy waiting impatiently for the shops to reopen after the pagan new moon festivals and after the Sabbath days ended – so that they can get back to selling grain and wheat. And here we read about the wealthy making the ephah – a common measurement for selling grains and oil – about making it smaller, thereby cheating customers. They were also making the shekel – the weight used on the scale to measure the product – heavier, thereby cheating their suppliers. They were stealing from both their customers and from their suppliers. Both practices were detestable to God.

Continuing into verse 6 we see what really upsets God. Yes, dishonesty is bad and surely upsets God's sense of justice and integrity. Here we read about the wealthy *"buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals."* These dishonest practices that were detestable to God placed the poor in such dire straights that they could be bought as slaves for a piece of silver or for a pair of sandals. The greed of the powerful drove the poor and needy to places of desperation.

While the wealthy and powerful felt like the nice shiny apple, like all was just great in the world, the poor and needy felt like the rest of the fruit in the bowl. Next, God begins to look beyond the ripe fruit to what was to come. He saw fruit that was well on its way to becoming rotten. The plight of the poor and needy was festering. There was not long before it would be no good. God is drawing an analogy to the nation of Israel. On the surface, things seem great to those with much.

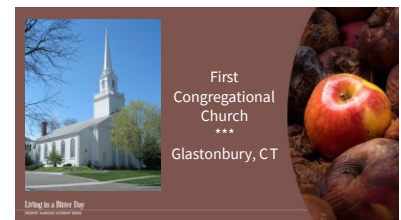


But look, really look, God says, and you can see that the decay is already under way. The people, the king, the priests – they have ignored the call to repent, to turn from idol worship, to end oppression and injustice of the poor and marginalized, to care for those in need. God sees the injustice, the oppression, the inequality, the economic injustice. But for the people in power, for the upper class of the nation, it is easy to overlook these things. They are following evil practices to their own advantage. And those that pay the price so that they can live in excess, in comfort, in pleasure, well, they are easy to ignore or at least look past.

Growing up in suburban Glastonbury, Connecticut, life was pretty nice. All the apples looked nice and shiny. My dad had a great job, and my mom did well as a teacher. My brother and I had anything we needed and usually most things we wanted. We were a part of a Congregational church with a slight bent towards our sister church, Faith Congregational Church, in downtown Hartford. Each Wednesday some of us from our youth group would load up on the church bus painted with flowers, peace signs, and such. We would drive into Hartford to our sister church, and we would spend about an hour helping the local elementary school kids with their schoolwork and then we'd play – usually outside on the playground – for about an hour before heading home to our little place out in suburbia. It made me feel good to go in and help and have fun with these children. I saw this as a bowl of ripe fruit. I did not understand why someone needed to go and help these students. I didn't understand why the church had this group of students there with such great needs, never mind that these needs were there every day, not just on Wednesdays.



Fast forward about a dozen years. Kristin and I had gotten married in our little suburban church that we attended regularly. Now, if you've never been to Connecticut, it gets a bit hot and really humid during the summer. That year, in about 2001, a group in the church decided that the sanctuary should be air conditioned. At the time it would cost about \$300,000 to air condition that 300-year-old building. Others, however, were aware that our sister church in Hartford was really struggling to just keep the doors open.



Well, the arguments were made: Did we really need air conditioning for three weeks of the summer? Wouldn't it be better to give that money to our struggling sister church? A light bulb went off in my head. Memories of tutoring and playing with the children of that church and that church's neighborhood came flooding back. Votes were cast. It was decided that air conditioning was needed for those three weeks. We began attending the Congregational church in Manchester. Others also went elsewhere. Most folks stayed. To Kristin and I, the fruit in the basket didn't look so nice and shiny and delicious anymore. As was the case in Amos' day, the "haves" ended up having more and those with less, well, they were left to struggle on.



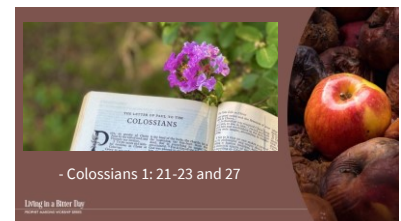
In our scripture for today, God sees the issues: the inequality, the imbalance of goods and freedom. God will not overlook what is happening in the community of faith and within the hard hearts of those in positions of power. Amos is sent to speak a word. In verses 4 through 6, we heard God speak to the condition of their hearts. They keep the Sabbath, but not out of devotion to God. It is out of habit. They honor the monthly new moon festival but cannot wait to sell their goods again. They cheat the poor and needy by changing the measuring unit to their advantage. They cheat their business partners using dishonest weights. They make slaves of the poor and needy for a silver coin, for a pair of sandals. They do not see how their comfort comes at the expense of those on the margins.

Continuing on in the passage, God will send a famine on the land. The feasts will turn to mourning, laments will be sung, sackcloth will be worn by every person. Baldness will be seen on all their heads. The end of it will be *“like a bitter day.”* And not only will the cost be physical, but the cost will also be spiritual as well. In verse 11 God says, *“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.”* Once the famine and hardships begin to get real, in their distress the people will try and seek God, but they will not find God. At that point, they will be too far from God to find their way back. That’s what it felt like in the church I grew up in, in the church that I was married in. To me, they had lost their way. Even when voices spoke of the poor and needy among us, of those brothers and sisters in Christ who were struggling to keep the doors open, it fell on deaf ears. Even when the needs of another church community were elevated against the desires of our own faith community, some of our hearts remained hard.

Like the youth group going into Hartford to tutor and play with those young children, Grace does much good in the community. Earlier I mentioned the church garden and the community garden. We also have VBS, youth group, and the After School Programs. Three times a year, we give food boxes at the holidays to families in need at our two local schools. Grace also supports a dozen ministries, one each month through our Mission of the Month. We offer a grief support group. These are all good things, all reasons to celebrate being in ministry to each other and to the community. Yet today, in light of what was going on in ancient Israel during his time, Amos asks us, is all this enough? Are we looking deep enough?

Sometimes we as a church and we as individuals address voiced needs. Sometimes we as a church are led to see and address needs. Sometimes we ourselves notice and respond to needs. Amos is inviting us to see a world in need of God's guidance and love, to see a world where there is injustice and oppression and inequality, to see the world as it is and to turn to our God of hope and love. There are solutions, there are possibilities for building the kingdom of God here and now that includes a greater, more diverse community. In that spirit, where might God be calling you or Grace United Methodist Church to respond to the needs of our community?

Please turn with me to Colossians 1, our Epistle reading for this week. It reminds us of the hope that we find in Christ. It brings some hope to darkness of the Amos passage. For us, for you and me, we know hope in and through Christ. These words provide hope for those who are now lost - like those who were lost in Amos' day. Hear now our hope!



²¹And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, ²³provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a minister of this gospel... ²⁷To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Even though we were once estranged from God, even though we once acted in evil ways, God reconciles us, making us holy and blameless. This offer of reconciliation and welcome into the family of God – it is available and offered to all people. Paul encourages us to remain steadfast and to hold onto the hope that we find in Christ – hope in this world and hope for the life to come. It is with this hope that we live and love one another well. Living and loving well, our lives bring God the glory as we share the love of Christ with those in need. Living and loving well, our faith will invite those living in a bitter day to find hope and faith, a salve to their woes, a balm to their suffering.



In today's main passage, we see once again that God called Amos. Remember, he was a pretty ordinary guy. He was not seminary trained, ordained, or commissioned. Recall, Amos herded animals and trimmed trees. Yet God called him to an enormous job, to a job that asked him to see deeper and to give a message that many did not want to hear. Amos saw to the root of the rot that was prevalent in his society. Yes, he was called a troublemaker by some. He made lots of people uncomfortable and some even angry. But he spoke truth. Amos was called by God. He accepted a hard task and he followed God's lead. May you and I do the same. May it be so for us all this week. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In your faith life, when have you faced a hard decision that forced you to decide upon something for yourself or on something for “the other”? How did working through this decision help you grow in your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Where in our world does mistreatment or oppression occur, causing your blood pressure to rise? Spend some time in prayer seeking God’s guidance.
- 3) *Study*. Read Amos 9:11-15. How does this promise of restoration offer you hope? Who do you know that might need to know this story of God’s love?