

SEEKING SOMETHING MORE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

July 18, 2010

Scripture: Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42

There is a connection between the two passages we read today, eight centuries apart in time, spanning the history between the message of the prophet Amos, and the life of Jesus sitting in the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany.

Amos was a man on a mission. Not a professional prophet, if we can speak of it that way, he was simply a shepherd in Tekoa during the reign of the evil king Jeroboam II. Israel and its neighbors had oppressed the poor, and Amos was given the job of announcing God's displeasure. He decried the injustice of Damascus and Tyre, Edom and Gaza, and Judah as well, standing at the gate of the royal shrine at Bethel where he said God was sickened by their worship. The politics were corrupt. The suffering of the poor insufferable. Money had become the people's first concern. And the ill-gotten gain would cause the people to be taken into slavery Amos warned.

It didn't happen right away. But in time, in 721 BC, all of Amos' predictions came true. They were starved into submission. Samaria surrendered, and the people were taken into captivity never to return.

Amos' call to prophesy came when God showed him a bowl of beautiful summer fruit. The full and bountiful image, however, belied the truth that like any fruit that is at full season, ripe and ready, it must be consumed or it will rot. The play on words that Amos uses, the word for summer fruit (qayis) sounds enough like the Hebrew word meaning *ending* (haqqes) that the double meaning was conveyed.

Whatever appeal the image of fruit expressed, behind it was Amos' sense that God's patience had worn out. Israel's greed and injustice toward the poor was intolerable.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land... We will make the ephah small and the shekel great [in other words the dollar worthless and the penny valuable], and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.... [for] ...The end has come upon my people Israel, [declared Amos] I will never again pass by them.

I am struck by Amos' concern for the abuse of the poor and the links with our own time, and the newly poor today. Retirees whose savings are nearly gone. Those who are in foreclosure. The unemployed of our cities, minority kids who cannot find a job, college kids who can't find summer work. The fishermen and workers of the Gulf coast. The people we hear about on the news each night. They are the newly poor. Amos tells us they are God's special concern.

Some of you have seen the movie “Up in the Air,” a film about a corporate warrior who is hired to lay off employees for companies that prefer to outsource this unpleasant task. In a review of the movie, Frank Rich comments,

The dispossessed Americans [of this movie are] not the familiar contemporary blue-collar factory workers in our devastated manufacturing economy. They are instead mostly middle class refugees from the suburban good life depicted in credit card ads. Their correlative to the Dust Bowl is a coast to coast wasteland of foreclosed office spaces where desk chairs and knots of dead phones lie abandoned in a florescent half light... What “Up in the Air” captures is...the cultural and physical chasm that opened up between the two Americas for years before the financial collapse. The private equity deal makers who bought and sold once solid companies like trading cards, saddling them with debt, never saw the workers whose jobs were shredded ... Washington and Wall Street ... invented junk mortgages and then bundled and sold them as securities [but] didn’t live in the same neighborhoods as the mortgagees, small investors and retirees left holding the bag once the housing bubble burst. Those at the top are separated from the consequences of their actions.¹

Now, lest you think that this is Beat Up on Wall Street Sunday, let me quickly add that we have all played our role in this drama. Long before the economic bubble burst, we had become so insecure about our retirement and savings and investments and the daily rise and fall of the market, that we had pushed and ridden the waves of insecurity in such a way as to create a climate of greed that reached far beyond Wall Street to the street where we live.

And there’s been plenty of unemployment, people on the ropes in this congregation who were doing better a few years ago than they are today. It has not been an easy time for any of us.

But in our insecurity we have convinced ourselves that money can buy us what we most need - security, well being, the good life, even happiness. The fall of the market and the erosion of our sense of well being, Amos would tell us is a judgment about the false gods that we have set up for ourselves. Money can’t get us those things. Not really. Comfort, perhaps. A second home. A nice vacation. A night at a Broadway show. More square footage in an apartment. But security, well being, happiness? I don’t think so.

We hunger and thirst for something more than that which money can buy. There is a deeper longing within us that leaves us unsatisfied by all the *stuff* we acquire.

That being said, we still have not learned much. An article in the *Times* this Friday reported that banks are a step ahead of the new financial regulations.

The article says,

...after spending many millions of dollars to lobby against the legislation, bankers are now turning to Plan B: Adapting the rules and turning them to their advantage.

...Compelled to trade derivatives in the daylight of closely regulated clearinghouses, rather than in murky over-the-counter markets, titans [in the industry] are building up their derivatives brokerage operations. Their goal is to make up any lost profits by becoming matchmakers in the vast market for these instruments, which critics say were a principal cause of the financial crisis.²

Hear Amos again...

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.

One of you, a broker in real estate banking, a couple of years ago now, when the economy tanked said, “I heard it the first time... that we were responsible. I understand. I get it. I was at the center of it. It was bad and we knew it was bad all the time, and I even said so. But everybody just kept loaning and bundling and selling.”

It’s not just the brokers. It’s not just the money managers. It’s not just Goldman or Wells Fargo or JP Morgan. It’s all of us, rising and falling in our trust of money to protect us and save us and get us what we most need in life. Even though in our heart of hearts, we know it can’t.

There is an emptiness, a futility to all of this and it doesn’t take a business degree from Harvard to figure it out. There is an insecurity that is there in our life that we keep trying to satisfy with wealth, but it doesn’t work because the hunger that we have is for something deeper and more enduring than what money can buy.

Mary knew this, in the story today from Luke’s gospel. Jesus came to spend time and break bread with Mary and Martha, and rather than fuss in the kitchen like Martha, Mary had the wit to pay attention to the hunger of her soul and sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to what he said. It’s not that hospitality is unimportant, not that Martha’s efforts were wasted. But when Martha fussed at Mary for not helping her, she imposed on Mary her own anxiety over immediate concerns that Mary had laid aside in order to pay attention to the larger matter, the irreplaceable moment that had arrived for her, which was to feed the hunger not of her body but of her soul.

The common thread that binds the Amos passage with the visit of Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha, is the emptiness that Amos and Mary share, a readiness to receive out of their poverty of spirit the filling of that emptiness with the fullness of God.

The story that those who have been to Haiti and to Guatemala and to Nicaragua, those with whom I spoke at General Assembly last week who have been to Kenya and Cameroon and South Africa, the stories that they tell are always stories of hospitality, of going and visiting as church groups where they are met with lavish kindness; people who

have barely a chicken in the entire village, will kill it and prepare it so that their guests will have enough to eat. It is the wealth of these people's faith that causes them to live out of the abundance of their heart rather than out of the poverty of their circumstances, which is why so many of us who receive from that abundance when we go there, return home with a new perspective on what is important in life.

My friend Tim Hart Anderson, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis told us the story of a man in his congregation, a retired executive upon whom Tim could always count for a contribution to support mission. But Tim knew that this was a somewhat alien enterprise to this fellow who pretty much held a nineteenth century view of church mission based on the idea of sending missionaries into the field to convert those who had not heard the gospel.

Tim said he asked this man to go with him on a trip to Palestine that the church was sponsoring. They spent time in Bethlehem behind the security barrier, the Wall, and he got to know the people there in the Palestinian territory, saw the burdens of daily life, the struggle of Christians to live day to day in such a hostile environment. He came back a changed man. Deeply concerned about the Middle East and the ways in which it might be possible to stand in solidarity with Palestinians while not ignoring the concern for Israeli security. He has since made two more trips to the Middle East with church groups.

Tim said, this man is now at every discussion of the church's mission program, his financial giving has increased, and this past Monday he joined a group of youth from the church as a chaperone on their trip to Cuba for a mission experience there. Late in life, he has discovered something that money cannot buy, a hunger for righteousness, a longing for God.

There is, this summer, a kind of emptiness that has fallen upon us as a nation, a longing for something more. Do you sense it as I do?

Maybe it's been the constant video streaming of that oil flow a mile below the water's surface fouling the Gulf coast that has done it, the slicks of brown goo, the toxic smells in the air, the carcasses of the pelicans and turtles and fish that have washed ashore on the beaches from Louisiana to Florida. Maybe at last they are able to control the worst of it, but so much damage has been done. Something has befallen us that cries out as a crime against the environment. And it's our addiction to oil that's done it. Drill baby drill, remember?

Or *maybe* it's the pessimistic news that came this week indicating the recovery of the economy will take more like five to six *years* rather than five to six *quarters* that has dampened our spirits.

Maybe it's the news that came this week that unemployment has reached 13% in some places in the country. Or the fact that the electorate is so restless that no one is considered trustworthy in public office and anyone currently in, should go out. As if that would be the answer to all of our problems, a new set of rascals.

Maybe it's the rising number of American casualties in Afghanistan that has sowed this dis-ease. The nineteen and twenty and twenty five year olds that come from places like Des Moines, Iowa, and Fort Collins, Colorado, and Biloxi, Mississippi, and the Bronx who return home in flag draped caskets... and why? Is our presence in Afghanistan really keeping the flames of Al Qaeda down, or only throwing gasoline on the fire? I wonder if the money we are spending on bombs and bullets were spent instead on clinics and classrooms whether Al Qaeda would have the same appeal or maybe it's too late to ask such a question. Maybe it's too late.

Amos looked at Israel and saw a bowl of summer fruit, and while it was beautiful it was also ripe with no place to go but decline.

Amos doesn't offer an answer to Israel, no course of redemption or resolution to its dilemma. His job is simply to announce God's displeasure.

One scholar, Craig Satterlee, has suggested that the prophecy of Amos is not a call to change but an announcement of God's point of view and intention. It is an intimate conversation between God and Amos, and all Amos is supposed to do is announce that God is fed up. And all we are supposed to do is to listen.

Satterlee says this is, in a quirky way, good news for those who,

are fed up with the way things are... Amos assures us that God's patience with institutional sin and hypocrisy will run out. Amos promises that God will act to stop and change the world. Amos entices us to trust in the coming day.³

This is hopeful Satterlee says, because:

When Jesus got in the way of humanity's plans for power and riches, we nailed Jesus to the cross. But God foiled our schemes, exposed our guilt, and brought darkness to the earth. For three long days, the word of the Lord was silent. Then God spoke by raising Jesus from the dead, and our plan of extermination was replaced by God's plan for new life. Whenever humanity seeks to dominate, destroy or reduce God's creation to a commodity, God stops our plans... The delay will be frustrating for those who wait for the Lord to act. But the day of the Lord will come.⁴

The link between Amos and Mary sitting at Jesus' feet is their awareness of the emptiness within them, their hunger for righteousness, their longing for God. It is the beginning point for whatever God is going to do in our lives and in the world.

And so it's that to which I call you to be mindful today. The emptiness within, the ennui of these summer days, the unfinished nature of things, the incompleteness of life. Until we know the gnawing hunger for God, we cannot yet be ready for whatever it is that God will do. But the promise is that God will act, beyond our ability to foul things up, our greed and destructiveness, our selfish interests and disdain for the creation. God will act.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her Beecher Lectures at Yale suggested that we live in a time when we are hungry for God, and there is spiritual famine in our land.

She says,

...the work of the preacher then is not to end the human hunger and thirst for God's word but to intensify it, until the whole world bangs its forks for God's food. That is what the famine is for, according to scripture. That is why God has hidden God's face: to increase our sense of loss until we are so hungry and lonely for God that we do something about it – not only one by one but also as a people who are once again ready to leave our fleshpots in search of real food.⁵

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¹ Frank Rich, "Hollywood's Brilliant Coda to America's Dark Year," New York Times, December 13, 2009, p. WK9

² New York Times, "Cut Back, Banks See a Chance to Grow", July 16, 2010, B1.

³ Craig A. Satterlee, Amos 8:1-12," **Interpretation**, April 2007, 202ff.

⁴ Satterlee, p. 204.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, **When God is Silent**. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998. 120-121.