

I struggle with passages like this. If I had my druthers, I'd preach the words of Jesus and the letters of the New Testament every time I got behind the pulpit. But then I remember that Jesus was Jewish, and the Hebrew Bible was the only scripture he had. And part of being like Jesus is learning the tradition that molded him, the one that reveals the nature of the God Jesus always points us toward. So: here we are with the prophet Amos foretelling the doom of Israel based on this vision of fruit, which is a little weird, unless you realize that image is wordplay. The word for "summer fruit" and "end," as in "end" of Israel, sound similar in Hebrew. Yay for learning Biblical languages!

So this is a grim vision, but the prophets give us a few of those. The main reason I struggle with this passage is the seeming absence of any ability to repent that it suggests. The God I love and worship is the God of infinite mercy and forgiveness. The God who sees into the depths of our hearts, measures our brokenness with mercy, and grants us the ability to come clean, try again, listen to God anew. But that is not what the prophet seems to be revealing here. There will be wailing and the casting out of dead bodies. Earlier in Amos we read of various kinds of famine, but here is revealed a famine of a different sort. This is a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. The text reads, "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."

OUCH! This is what I have trouble getting my head around. When we have gone astray and we realize it, we are always supposed to be able to come back to God. Aren't we? Isn't that what all the grace, mercy, and forgiveness is about? When we turn aside from God's word, the one thing that should be able to draw us back is our recognition of our need for God, our repentance, our seeking out God's

Word. Why would God send a famine of the one thing that can get us back on track?

As I studied Amos, I found this concern rolling around with a couple of other questions that have been gnawing at me. First, why does it matter that we believe what we do, as opposed to believing something else? And second, what is the purpose of our worship? You know, just little stuff. I think these three concerns: a failure to hear God, what we believe, and our worship, are all intertwined, and I would like to explore that with you all here.

I won't bog you down with history, but it helps to know how we got dumped into this harsh vision Amos is revealing. We know from the book's introduction that the setting is the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when King Jeroboam ruled Israel. Amos, a sheep breeder—so, not a “professional” prophet—is declaring God's judgement against Israel, which is to the north of Judah. Now, scholars contend this was a time of unprecedented financial wealth for Israel. However, that wealth is distributed in a massively unequal fashion. The tiny number of people who have become very wealthy are using their power and influence to manipulate the economic systems, making themselves even wealthier while the growing number of poor people become even poorer. Sound familiar?

And they are not honoring the time when they are supposed to be worshipful. In our reading, Amos says the “devourers of the needy” are just waiting for the new moon—a time of ritual—and the Sabbath to be over, because they cannot buy and sell during those times. And when they are buying and selling, they are ripping off the poor. The section about buying the poor for a pair of sandals likely refers to debt slavery. While we do not have literal debt slavery today, I bet you know some folks who are mired under their debts due to no fault of their own. It is in the midst of this

that Amos declares that God will send a famine to those who commit these injustices—a famine from hearing from God.

But why? Why would God remove the opportunity to listen and repent? To get to that question, we need to look at a bigger question behind it: what do these people believe—or rather, fail to believe—about God? What does their relationship with God and those around them look like? And what does that have to do with us?

Right before this passage, the priest Amaziah in Bethel, where Amos is, gets hold of King Jereboam and tells him what’s up—this random guy Amos is prophesying that Jereboam will die and Israel will be exiled. Then he tells Amos to get out—to go south to Judah. He can’t be prophesying in Bethel, because it is a ROYAL sanctuary, a STATE temple. See, they have their own “prophets,” and Amos is not one of them. He’s a herdsman, and a tender of sycamore trees—a regular working guy. But God has called him to deliver these prophecies. And God NEEDED to call him, because the prophets at Bethel are not delivering the word of God. They have been bought out by the State, telling the king and those in power all the things they want to hear, NOT calling them to the fairness and justice that God demands of the leaders.

In other words, when God breaks through all the barriers they have set up to mute God’s word, and God delivers a true prophet, those in power do not want to hear it. Because they do not believe that God’s word applies to them. They have chosen their own way of “justice” apart from God—which is clearly no justice at all. And they are very religious! In chapter four the author invites the wives of the oppressors—sarcastically—to continue bringing their tithes, offerings, and sacrifices. In Chapter Five, God, through Amos’ mouth, declares rejection of their sacrifices and songs. So they are worshipping and sacrificing. Yet that worship and

sacrifice is not connected to God, because it is not lived out in their actions. It is dead worship, guided by their own vision, not God's.

Let's read that passage about the famine again. My translation reads, "They will stagger from sea to sea (the Hebrew word for "sea" can also translate to "west"), from north to east, they shall roam around seeking the word of YHWH, but they shall not find it." So, they will travel to the sea, or west, north, and east. Remember this is the Northern Kingdom, and where is the one direction they are not going to seek out God's word? South. And what direction does Amaziah tell Amos to go, to stop him from being a threat? South. Now, the text does not say that God will put shackles around the people's feet to keep them from going South to hear from Her. They just will not go there. In other words, they will only "look" for God in the places where what they hear will confirm their existing greed, corruption, and oppression. As our friends in the United Church of Christ like to say, God is still speaking. The famine comes because the people will not open themselves and go to the place they need to be in order to hear God's true word.

So what does this have to do with what we believe, what our faith in God looks like and how we live it? Especially in a time that bears similarities to the one Amos prophesied to, with massive wealth inequalities and worsening conditions for the poor?

Have you ever heard anyone say, "It does not matter what you believe, it's what you do that counts"? For example, if we claim to follow the God of Jesus Christ, but we fail to live in a way that reflects the love and justice he calls us to—which is a continuation of the justice the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, like Amos preached—does our faith really matter? How does the singing we do together here every Sunday, our confession, our repentance, our baptism and taking of

communion, connect with how we live every other day of the week? Why spend this time here on Sunday, rather than spending that time at NNEMAP or the Clintonville Beechwold Community Center—both great places to do the work of Jesus, by the way? I argue that we see the significance of our gathered worship in this passage right here. It is by making the intentional choice to come together, to give time and space to hear from God, that the Holy Spirit fills and empowers us to do the work of God. But only when we are truly open to hearing—only when our worship genuinely connects us to the God who speaks.

Some people interpret other passages from Amos to mean that worship is unnecessary, that action for justice is all that matters. For example, Chapter Five reads that God asks the people to spare their hymns, but let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream. That last bit may sound familiar, because the Rev. Dr. MLK famously quoted it. But what does our justice look like if it is not rooted in God? Without worship to align us, our sense of justice becomes twisted. What Amos is railing against is not ritual, not songs of worship, but the false appearance of worship split from life, split from our relationship with God and others.

In our passage from today, Amos criticizes those who “devour the needy” for not honoring the ritual time and space of the new moon. For wanting the Sabbath, God’s appointed time of rest, to end. These verses show that setting time aside for God is important, and failing to honor our times of worship goes against God’s desire to be with us—and our deep need to connect with God. Worship reminds us who we belong to. When done with reverence, our time of gathered worship gives us the space to listen to God, setting aside our anxieties and our grasping. Confessing together, aloud, our shortcomings, not as a form of public shaming, but

to recognize that we constantly need to place ourselves before God, to recalibrate toward the One we have committed ourselves to. When we only go through the motions, like the Israelites Amos decries, we place our ways above God's. We can easily fall into the illusion that God needs us to determine right, rather than that we need God—that God's voice has no authority, only ours.

At the time of this book, God chose prophets to speak through—a few folks selected in particular times and places to deliver God's word. But the prophet Joel writes that in the last days, God will pour God's Spirit out on all flesh. That is the text the author of Acts points to at Pentecost. As Christians, we place our faith in Jesus, the one who made possible the pouring out of the Holy Spirit so that all can hear from God. God has granted us a miracle—a connection to the One who created us by following Christ, through the power of his Holy Spirit. God grants each of us, and us gathered as Christ's body, gifts that empower us to live Jesus' love, mercy, and justice into the world. But we have to listen for God and follow where Jesus leads.

You all here have shown that you do listen for God, and when we open ourselves like that—when we want to follow Jesus and make the space for that collectively—God shows us the way. You held a season of prayer and heard from God a call to serve your community. That was when Rebecca Hug came calling with an invitation to participate in the Community Engagement Experience. That's when I responded to God's call on my own life to serve here, taking on the role of Community Engagement Director. My invitation to you now is, stay open. Focus on God. Focus on how you are hearing the call of Spirit in gathered worship and fellowship, and where Jesus is calling you beyond these walls.

Some of you know I come from the Pentecostal tradition. Pentecostalism holds that God can communicate with us in some pretty dramatic ways. I will be the first to say that this can get skewed. It can turn into manipulation, a push for power and control, and pressure to have certain experiences to “prove” that one is in right relationship with God. I am not about that at all. But I have found that being open to the Spirit in worship has helped me personally connect with God—and therefore others and myself—in some pretty powerful ways. Also, if you look at the history of early Methodism, John Wesley and many of the early Methodists were having some experiences that were pretty dramatic. A lot of folks in the UMC are on a quest right now to discover what the heart of Wesleyan worship and practice looks like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It may be worth looking into the past to get some inspiration for that. I am just putting it out there.

We have one hymn left to sing together: “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken.” As we sing, I invite you to reflect on how God is connecting with you through the song—you as an individual, but also the gathered body of Christ—you as a congregation. What does it mean that, through grace, we are members of Zion’s city? After we finish our fellowship here today and go out into the world, how do we live our claim that we glory in God’s name?

Let us always listen for the call of the Spirit of God. Let us give our time in worship and prayer not for pursuing our own ends, but for honoring the LORD who always seeks to be closer to us—who never withholds a word when we faithfully open ourselves to hear. Amen.