

**Amos 8:1-12**

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 spare them no longer. 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!” Hear this, you who 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 smaller and the shekel heavier 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.” The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. 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? On that day, says the LORD God, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. 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. 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. 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. (349)

Amos was angry. He felt sure the Lord was angry. The rich were getting richer and they were forgetting the poor. These rich: they were eager for the Sabbath to be over so they could get back to making money. They would rebalance the scales so they’d measure to their advantage. Meanwhile, their worship was getting ever more intricate and impressive, fervent with national pride and false mysticism, but the *point* of all this worship was obscured: to inspire justice, to move the people to mercy and righteousness. Amos was full of righteous rage, which he was sure the Lord was full of as well, so full that the Lord promised to stop speaking, to stop countenancing the people who would come to starve for such dreadful silence. The word by which they’d come to live: it would fall silent. It would speak elsewhere.

It would happen, or so Amos prophesied, speaking for the Lord—and who am I to doubt that?

This we know because Amos’s book is full of righteous rage, brief though it is. He is one of the minor prophets, his book in the Bible among twelve shorter prophetic texts.

Yes, he had some light moments—or one, at least. He wrote these encouraging words, encouraging the people to “let justice shall roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” In fact, the joke among preachers is this about Amos’s book, whenever it presents itself in the lectionary. “Amos! I love that line!”

As for the rest of the book...? “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. 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.”

As for the man himself, what we can conclude about him based on his book: he prophesied in the eighth century before Christ, before the Common Era, long before most of the prophets prophesied.

This is surprising. It would surprise even him. After all, he wasn’t born into the way of the prophet. Most prophets that we meet in the Bible are professionally in the role, and many are born into it. Did you know this, that the role itself was a professional one?

We might assume the prophet operated by his own rules, according to standards and practices of her own making. They were wild, the prophets were, we might think. They were out of bounds, marching to their own drum, unshaven, unshowered, mostly undressed (girded loins, belted waist, and that’s about it).

The fact of the matter is prophets were formal in their role. The prophet was a counterweight to the formal role of the king. They were there as a check on the otherwise absolute power of the king. They were there as the conscience to the one who could otherwise act with impunity and as such they had license to say to the king, “Don’t do that,” or “You’re wrong to consider that.” Like when Nathan said to King David, “You are that man!” He’d sketched out a scenario where one man had acted clearly in the wrong and David said, “We’ve got to get that man!” Nathan answered, “You *are* that man!” An unauthorized person having said that would have his head on pike. An authorized person might as well. More than a few prophets were killed by their king. More than a few ended stoned to death in the city square. But a few made it to old age.

This was a formal role, one you prepared for and were anointed into and likely performed with no small measure of fear and trembling.

It’s also one you’d have little choice about. Many were born into this role. Prophets’ sons often became prophets, and not necessarily by their own choosing.

But for Amos.

Amos was a shepherd and probably the son of a shepherd—and not even one who seemed to have been chosen by God or anointed by some esteemed authority. David had been a shepherd before he was anointed king, but God’s prophet Samuel recognized his potential and called him forth from the fields. No one seems to have done that for Amos. Amos admits of himself: “I am no prophet, nor even the son of prophet. I am a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees.”

Nonetheless, here he is, full of warning just like all the more established ones, though not having learned the art of offering hope while warning of destruction.

And here's another thing that has him stand out from the rest, that the time when he lived and worked and sounded his alarm was a time of peace and prosperity. This United Kingdom, the ancient one established by King David joining Israel and Judah, was enjoying a time of relative calm. Hence the basket of summer fruit in his vision: this was a season of summer for the people, full of plump sweetness and popping color.

A couple centuries after King David reigned, a couple centuries prior to when calamity did actually hit (Babylon attacking from the East and burning the city and tearing down the Temple and taking the people into exile), this was a period of calm and of riding pleasant momentum, the momentum of stability and accumulation. Yes, there were little battles on the borders, defending of territory and negotiation of boundaries. But overall, things were good.

So what was Amos sensing? What had him so piqued?

Sometimes the seeds of destruction are planted early and take so long to germinate.

But that's really the best time to make some corrections. You never want to say, "It's too late. There's nothing we can do." But sometimes it's too late.

At General Synod last week, each of the couple thousand delegates from UCC churches all over the country and even a few in other countries were assigned to one of eleven resolutions. Mine was to make a public witness in favor of the presidential administration reinstating all funding and staffing for USAID.

The first of Elon Musk's casualties, the United States Agency for International Development wasn't an unalloyed good in the world. It could be used for undermining foreign governments. The fruits of it could be as a trojan horse to pursue a political agenda that is to the advantage of the United States. However, having said that, which we did, it's as good a thing as almost any international effort has ever been. It nearly eradicated HIV/AIDS in Africa. It fed children who'd otherwise starve around the world. It provided vaccination where none would otherwise have reached. While it could be political, even coercive, it was far more so humanitarian. And Musk, anointed by Trump, saw fit to kill it.

The discussions about the resolution were stimulating, frustrating, irritating, inspiring. Should we use this word or that, we pondered? Should this be tacked onto an already existing "Therefore be it resolved" or should this become a new one, we wondered in the weeds. Is USAID something the UCC should stamp its approval on, asking both in light of the historical record of

the church that we were contributing to and in light of the moment, the pressing moment—whether USAID might be resurrected soon, even today.

Today!

Because are dying. People have already died. *Children* have died. Because they've lacked the calories they'd have gotten from the Plumpy'Nut storehouse.

And on the day we voted to pass the resolution, to send to the Washington DC political arm of the denomination and indeed to meet the representative of the denomination seated there, the story came out in the *Atlantic Monthly* that the Trump administration had ordered the incineration of nearly 500 metric tons of emergency high-nutrition biscuits that could feed about 1.5 million children for a week. USAID had spent about \$800,000 on the food during the Biden administration for distribution to children in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was in storage in the United Arab Emirates when the Trump administration gutted USAID. Still, Secretary of State Marco Rubio assured the House Appropriations Committee that the food would get to the children before it spoiled.

It didn't.

Quoting this story, Heather Cox Richardson prefaced it all in crediting either the chaos of the administration for this waste and abuse or, she wrote, "deliberate evil."

Not known for rhetoric that is either religious or hyperbolic, Richardson saying this rang in my ears and stabbed my heart.

Sometimes it's too late.

Amos was two centuries ahead of things being too late. Amos was still in the summer of things.

And yet.

The momentum of contentment is hard to turn. That's just the way things go. The blessings of summer make the punishing silence of winter seem impossible. Impossible! With settled societies, with relative calm, the comforts of life are just too comfortable and those who have them have little reason to watch for calamity, say some two centuries hence.

And thus it happened as always happens, the comforts would flow mostly to those already comfortable. Because wealth builds on itself. Isn't that what Thomas Picketty showed us all? And wealth attracts wealth, those with it partnering with those who also have it. Really, unless there's intent and action for it to be otherwise, riches go to the rich, who by these become richer. You

have to try to sustain some semblance of equality. You have to work against the poor getting poorer.

But the poor are too busy being poor to gather into any sort of politics and collective action. So, it has to come from the top, from the middle.

What makes it all worse when it came to the ancient United Kingdom of Israel and Judah is that their whole reason for being as a people was to be a nation of mutual care, to be a politics amidst which there would never be a subset crushed by poverty while a ruling class sleeps on beds of ivory. I mean, this was inherent in their original call to be a people in the first place: they were to demonstrate concern for the widow and orphan in their midst, concern and just policy for the sake of the poor and the lame and the alien in their midst. They were to be a just nation amidst a world of unjust nations. That was whole point; that was *their* whole point. But over the decades, the now centuries, this concern had gone slack.

It's a slow process of forgetting and accepting. Human beings are remarkably adaptable. It's a slow process of sneaking inequality and flickering out of access to resources. The draining of public mercy happens slowly, new rhetoric to describe the poor, new slurs there to suggest the foreign-born. Why are they unkempt? Pull yourselves together! Why are they so unreliable? Maybe they should get a good planner.

In Kansas City, out for a walk one morning, I passed a mess that seemed to have been human-made. Did someone fail to clean up after their dog, I wondered as I approached in the alley behind my hotel. No, it seemed clear, that was left behind by someone far more desperate than a dog-owner without a poop-bag. The next morning, walking again, I came to a similar mess, but this one was covered with a pile of toilet paper. Someone really hadn't wanted to leave this mess, it seemed, but the person had no other options. This was the best that could be done. And whose fault is that?

At this creeping of injustice and oppression, Amos was called away from the sycamore and out of the herds to prophesy, calling out to those who "oppress the poor" and "crush the needy," calling out, "Alas for those who are at ease in Zion! Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and cows from the stall... who drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of [the people]."

But, see, the ruin was only beginning to show itself, and it's so easy not to notice it until it's too late. It takes a shepherd, maybe, someone close to the margin, someone close to the earth and all its murmurings, all its shifts and silent portentous whirls.

I admit to feeling about lot of things recently that it's too late. We're past any Amos moment, when an unlikely someone might have put two and two together. We're amidst something more of Lamentations, Jeremiah two centuries later weeping amidst the rubble.

People have wondered why Trump seems not to care that he's losing his base. With the rise again of the Epstein crimes and coverups, Trump has called his most ardent supporters "weaklings" and implied they're easily conned. And watchers of all this have wondered why he'd turn on his supporters, why he'd risk their turning on him. But, see, he's already president. He doesn't need them anymore. With the Supreme Court handing him ever more power, he doesn't need his base anymore. And unless Congress is willing to impeach once again, there's nothing we can do. It's too late.

It's too late.

And yet here we are.

You have come here, I can only guess, to hear of hope.

You have come to listen for a voice that might though, might though, have already fallen silent.

You have come here, I wonder, because of resurrection? And not even because you believe in it in some confessional religious sense but because you need it in a very practical, nearly desperate, sense. To get up in the morning. To give another day another go. You need it to be true. You need there to be a new word to speak past when everything has been said and done, past when all is lost and it's simply too late.

So here we are.

So, hear this word: the eternal God whose being is justice, whose being is perfect peace, joins us in time to inspire our living. Much has been lost but among the more marvelous aspects of the human being as God has made us each and all is a surprising newness, each of us stepping out of the inevitable every time we wake up in the morning. The ancient voice of angry hope has sounded forth. The future vision of justice and righteousness has been given glimpse. We gather in the meantime praying that the times shall be less mean and that we ourselves might be the means to make it so.

Listen.

The voice yet speaks.  
Thank be to God.