

## Amos 8:1–12

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My first inclination is to seize upon Amos' "Hear this, you . . ." and preach a rousing call to repentance to those "that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land" (v. 4). After all, in the Revised Common Lectionary, Amos 8:4–7, and not this entire text, is the assigned First Reading for Proper 20 Year C. If repentance turns out to be the theme of my sermon, I need to be clear that, from God's perspective, our sin against the poor is graver than failing to give five dollars to the homeless man I pass on my way to get my morning cappuccino and cinnamon roll. While the preacher could use individual encounters and isolated incidents to describe the disparity between the way faith is (not) practiced in daily life and our (supposed) harmony with God in worship, the sin of which Amos speaks is systemic. In our context, the farmers and workers around the world that produce the coffee I drink are not paid a living wage and do not have safe and healthy working conditions. As Amos tells it, God looks on Israel's oppressive economic system—and ours—and sees a sinister plan and secret desire to exterminate the poor.

The deceit in commerce that Amos describes is evidence of "the methodical destruction of the independent existence of small farmers and trades people" (Jörg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*, 1995, 144). The merchants use "false balances" to cheat their customers both in buying and selling (v. 5). Unable to repay even a trifling debt—"a pair of sandals" (v. 6)—the poor fall into irreversible economic enslavement to the merchants. The "ruin of the poor of the land" (v. 4) comes as Israel's business community systematically reduces human beings caught in poverty to the disposable means by which the rich accumulate wealth.

Even worse, the merchants buy the poor for silver while outwardly observing their faith. The merchants keep the sabbath and holy days by shutting their shops, but their hearts and minds remain open for business (James Limburg, *Hosea–Micah*, 1988, 120). The merchants' insatiable greed makes it impossible for them to rest on the sabbath and rejoice on holidays. Preoccupied with the profit they are losing, they begrudge the time God takes away from business and, as their words reflect (vv. 5–6), cannot contain their desire to get back to making money.

As I sip my cappuccino, the parallels between the marketplace in Samaria and American society and our global economy strike me as inescapable. "Repent!" I want to rail. "Faith has as much to do with the shop and the shekel as it does with the sabbath and the sanctuary!" (Limburg, 121). There is only one problem with this proclamation. I find no call to repentance in this passage. I do not hear the familiar, prophetic, "Thus says the LORD" that echoes earlier

in Amos (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; 3:11, 12; 5:3, 4, 16; 7:17). In this passage, God does not call Amos to speak; God does not commission Amos to proclaim. God does not speak to Israel through Amos; God speaks to Amos alone. Amos reports, "Then the LORD said to me . . ." (8:1).

In this passage, Amos does not engage in the specific prophetic function of proclamation. Amos does not speak to the people for God and to God for the people. Whereas Amos previously served as a mediator between God and Israel, knowing God's intentions for Israel and influencing those plans to Israel's advantage, now Amos is God's intimate conversation partner. This is a personal and private conversation. God does not direct Amos to pass the message on to others, and certainly not to proclaim it publicly. God does not give Amos any opportunity for intercession or to secure forgiveness on Israel's behalf. Alone with Amos, God judges Israel's sin and lets Amos in on what God intends to do about it. Rather than calling God to relent and Israel to repent, Amos silently takes God's side.

God's judgment is that "[t]he end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again [benignly] pass them by" (8:2). YHWH personally will bring about Israel's end by cutting off contact between Israel and God. The images are vivid and make for great preaching. On that day, all happiness will disappear and be transformed into lament. Even in the temple, festival songs will be replaced by wailing. The corpses will pile up like cordwood, "cast out in every place" (v. 3). I hear God warning, "Be silent!" so as not to attract Death, who is roaming the streets and bringing destruction.

God promises that the destruction will not be limited to Israel. As Israel's special experience of God in history imposes special responsibilities on the people of God (2:9), so Israel's failure to meet those responsibilities imposes dire consequences on the cosmos. On account of Israel's sin (v. 8), the earth will become sterile; Amos' description of the earth trembling, heaving, and being tossed about (v. 8) suggests the announcement of an earthquake. The resulting mourning that Amos describes (v. 10) is no mere feeling; it is humanity's experience of nature's failure to provide. The pain experienced over the devastated world and nature's failure will be so intense that Amos compares it to the mourning for an only child (v. 10).

The solemn oath by which God swears to bring Israel's end (v. 7) makes clear that the time for repentance has passed. Israel's sin is so great that it cannot be undone. This oath guarantees that God will be continually mindful of Israel's sin, that God will recall Israel's sin in full when punishing the perpetrators. God does not swear this oath by God's own self, by God's holiness, or by God's Name. God swears by the pride or arrogance of Jacob. "Yhwh's oath is as unalterable as Jacob's arrogant pride is beyond reform" (Hans Waler Wolff, *A Commentary on the Prophets Joel and Amos*, 1977, 328). When Israel puts on sackcloth and repents, God will send a famine of "hearing the words of the LORD" (v. 11). Though Israel wanders from sea to sea, and runs to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, "they shall not find it" (v. 12).

This passage is neither a call to repentance nor a warning to change. This passage really is not about Israel—or us—at all. In this passage, Amos tells about our God. Amos proclaims that there are limits to God's patience in the face of excessive guilt. Amos declares that God

will get fed up, that prophetic utterance will fall silent, and that God will call a halt and bring an end. When we call to God and search for God, God will not answer.

The first homiletic question I struggle with is whether this text suggests that everything happens for a reason. Are terrorist attacks, hurricanes, and earthquakes the judgment and acts of God? Many people think so. A parishioner comments, "When I see the earthquakes and the hurricanes, I know that our God is unhappy with the world." If we do not believe God sends natural disasters, what is this text saying?

The second homiletic question I struggle with is why, rather than a threat, does Amos' pronouncement that there are limits to God's patience strike me as good news? That there are limits to God's patience is good news for those the rich and powerful scheme to exterminate, because they will be saved. It is good news for those devastated and despairing due to institutional sin and hypocrisy, because our institutions, even the institutional church, will either be reformed or eliminated. Things as they are will not stand. God will get fed up. God will call a halt. God will bring an end.

That is what God did in raising Jesus from the dead. 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. God is very patient, giving us ample opportunity to repent. So the delay will be frustrating for those who wait for the Lord to act. But the day of the Lord will come.

This passage may inspire repentance, but it is not primarily, if at all, a call to repentance. For those who wait for God to act because they are fed up with the way things are, it is not a prediction of doom. 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. Rather than repentance, I will preach the good news that God gets fed up!



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