

Amos 8: 1-12 Summer Fruit

The book containing the words of the prophet Amos present us with the picture of someone taken from his normal life and set to a task that he wasn't real happy about. As we read last week about the vision of the plumb line to be applied to the nation of Israel, we understand that the nation's structure has not measured up to God's specifications. As Amos in obedience to God delivers the message, he clearly states he was not a priest. He did not consider himself a prophet or related to those belonging to the religious structure of the day. He thought of himself as a herdsman, a farmer. From the Hebrew word used for shepherd in the text he was not a poor man only tending a flock but was a landowner involved in breeding sheep and harvesting crops. He was not a citizen of the northern kingdom of Israel but of the southern kingdom of Judah. But God, in Amos' words, took him from the field and sent him into Israel with a message for those in charge of the nation. The message Amos brought was not one they wanted to hear and was met with hostility. The rejection of the message was based on two aspects—his authority and his being an outsider. In our passage today, we can hear echoes of God's anger about Israel's behavior. The timeline given for Amos' mission was the 8th century during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel. From what we know of the archeology dated to that time, it was a prosperous time for the small nation state—at least for those in the king's court and upper classes. They were in control of their own politics. There was no larger nation threatening them or dominating the way they did business. And that prosperity of those in power and the way it was gained and distributed was the problem. Today's text begins with another image from a vision given to Amos. Chapter 8, verse 1: "This is what the Lord showed me—a basket of summer fruit." I don't know about you but an image of summer fruit brings to mind something that might be painted by an artist like Cezanne. A painting of a table upon which is featured a bowl or basket of fruit—a still life scene. These still life paintings give an impression of a calm scene, easily recognizable and seem to carry no hidden or threatening meaning. But that is definitely not the image which Amos is shown because of what follows. The Hebrew word which is translated as summer fruit represents a play on the words found in the second statement made by the Lord in this passage. "Then the Lord said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel;" The Hebrew term for summer fruit is "*qayits*" which phonetically sounds much like the Hebrew word "*qets*" which is the term for "end". When we see a still life of a bowl of summer fruit we are likely to view it as an appealing picture. We recognize that the fruit has been harvested—it is no longer growing. But we see the fruit as something which would be good. When we plant our gardens in the spring and tend them throughout the growing season, we are expecting a pleasing yield in the summer, whether it is the fruit of the tomato vine or some tasty vegetables we will harvest. The vision Amos might have seen probably would have contained pomegranates, figs and grapes. Throughout scripture there are many references to Israel as being the vineyard which the Lord has planted and tended and expected to yield good fruit. In this vision Amos sees in the basket of fruit a metaphor for Israel. However, the image is not connected to what the Lord expected of what had been sown—pleasing fruit. Instead, the fruit is described in that basket represents the end of the nation. Israel is prosperous as a nation, but God's sees the nation not as having borne good fruit, but as having produced something which needs to be ended—something that must have looked rotten—ready to be thrown out. God's judgment is that the prosperity has not

yielded good fruit, but fruit which calls forth judgment. It seems that time has run out and there will be a consequence—"I will never again pass them by." With this vision of an end coming to Israel, Amos then again brings God's message. The people are given the basis for the judgment. As we read the next verses we understand that Amos is standing outside the people represented by the basket of summer fruit: "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land." Amos is doing what we would term finger pointing. He is calling out those who are in charge, those whose prosperity we see in the archeological findings. Since Amos was from Judah, not Israel, when he does this finger pointing it is easy to see why he stands outside the circle of accusation. When we hear these words of Amos, we often also tend to view ourselves as having a position outside of the problem—Amos is not pointing a finger at Judah or us. But looking closely at what is being called out—perhaps we should remember that when one puts out their hand in that finger pointing gesture, it is like my mother used to show me—there are some fingers pointing back at you. In fact, if you are pointing one finger at someone/something else—there are more pointing back at you than in the direction you are aiming. Perhaps the text should call for some self-examination. Amos begins to detail the flaws of those being judged. It seems that people are practicing deceit in the market place and violating the principles given to them by God when they became the covenant people. Verse 6 says they are buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. Yet while they are doing this on a daily basis, they are also participating in the designated religious festivals and observances. In other words, they are Sabbath keeping people. While observing the Sabbath they spend some of that time wanting the "new moon" to be over so they can continue their practice of selling grain—grain that has been mixed with the "sweepings of the wheat" or chaff and where the price is high and the volume shrunk. These people have separated their perceived duty to God from the way they live their daily lives. They are ones who regularly attend Sunday morning worship service but do not carry what they know of God's will for human behavior toward one another into their daily lives. It seems that Amos is pointing out for us not only that God sees their behavior as wrong, but that the justice (and holiness) which God demanded of the people from the beginning of the covenant relationship was not fulfilled through Sabbath offerings or religious festival observances—but in the way people lived their everyday lives and treated all those around them—including the needy or poor. The interesting question for us as we view this passage is where do we place ourselves in the narrative? How do this vision of summer fruit and the accusations which follow apply to us? Is this simply a question of individually keeping ourselves from unjust actions? Of not unfairly taking advantage of another? We can probably do this reasonably well. We don't set the prices or determine product purity. But if we examine the situation at a broader level, what happens? We can position ourselves outside the "system" of big banks, of the Wall Street finance system, of corporations that have deceitful business practices. After all, we are just ordinary folks. We don't make decisions that have that much influence. Or do we? In fact, in our complex and inter-related world, we actually do participate in many systems. Not all of these systems run on the precepts that would be acceptable to God. Some of these systems are working toward creating a more just society; some are trying to alleviate the wrongs within our culture; some are trying to work toward acceptance and respect for those who are different. But there are other systems which want to perpetuate wrongs because they benefit from them; some who want to create and aggravate divisions

within society in order to protect and preserve their own status. Too often when we hear any message which involves finger pointing, we hear it from outside the circle of the accused and feel we stand with the accuser. We too often hear this message of Amos as a dualistic one, not a complex one. We believe that we stand firmly outside the system with Amos and can join in pointing our fingers. Instead, we need to appreciate that we are actually within the system—just as Judah is later judged lacking for the same flaws that Amos points out in Israel—we are actually within the system. The system—society—in which we reside has aspects of both justice and injustice—love and acceptance for all as well as hatred and prejudice for the other. What we are called to do is to increase the one and decrease the other—in our lives and by our actions and example in the lives of others. It is important to note that God does not condemn the marketplace—only the untrustworthiness of it when justice for all is not the guiding principle upon which it operates. The secular world does not have to automatically be a realm of injustice—God’s people are called upon to see that it is not. The reading began with indictment for Israel’s sin. It ends with the pronouncement of a dire fate—all their feasts and celebrations will be turned upside down—there will be mourning and darkness. There will be famine and thirst. But the famine and thirst will be due to the lack of hearing the words of the Lord. People will wander from place to place and not find what they are seeking. Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopalian priest and the author of numerous books including one with the title “When God is Silent” writes that “Silence is God’s last defense against our idolatry.” When people no longer can hear God’s because the lives they are living are so far from what God desires then those lives become empty and dark. When lives become dark, only God can restore light. Jesus affirms that the things we learned of God through the prophets and the scriptures have not changed. The covenant law still applies and we are called to live in obedience by loving God and each other. That we are so loved that God acted to send Christ into the world for our sake is a constant comfort because we know as Paul says in Romans nothing can separate us from that love. We will all fall short and so stand accused. But because we are loved, we can move forward, not in the darkness of which Amos spoke but in the light given to us by Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.