

Ripe Fruit

The text from Amos begins much like the one from last week, it begins with a vision, something that we are told that God shows Amos to illustrate a point. Last week, it was a plumb line and a wall built with a plumb line—the plumb line being a metaphor for God’s law; for what God had revealed about how Israel’s foundation should have been built; what followed was the message Amos was given to take to Israel the reality that Israel’s foundation had not been built by that standard; judgment was therefore coming. Today’s text begins in much the same way. Amos 8:1—“This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit.” A basket of summer fruit is an image which probably brings forth for us visions of still life paintings and summer picnics, or perhaps we envision a bowl that we might place on our own kitchen counters with fresh apples, bananas or other fruit which serves as an appealing decoration or a handy snack. But in this case, that is not the picture which God is drawing for Amos. In this vision, based on a word play found in the Hebrew language God is declaring a much less benign vision which a description of Israel. As before, the vision contains a question and answer conversation. “He said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’” We can tell God is declaring to Amos that it is the season of judgment. The key to understanding this is found in what is translated as summer fruit, but more correctly for the Hebrew “*qayits*” would be ripe fruit. Ripe fruit is that which is harvested at the end of the summer, it has reached the end of the growing season. The fruit in the basket Amos sees is ripe. It has been picked and placed in a basket. The people, God is saying, have come to an end as well; they will be put in their place, also. It is when we make this connection to the ripe state of the fruit, the end of the fruit so to speak that the connection to the following statement of the Lord makes sense. Once Amos has identified the fruit as ripe, as being at an end, then the Lord states, “The end—the *qes*--has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” The words that the prophet Amos brought to the people were full of God’s anger about their behavior; their failures to live so that the society would be built according to the standards given to them and agreed to by them in the covenant promise. The timeline that we have for when Amos spoke God’s word reminding the people of God’s view of their behavior was the 8th century. Jeroboam II was the ruler of the northern kingdom that was the nation state of Israel. From archeological studies dated to that time period, we know that for the nation, or at least the king and those in the king’s court and upper classes, it was a time of prosperity. There was no other nation state in the region threatening them or dominating them or controlling the way that they did business. They were truly an independent state. And that was the issue. It was their prosperity—that of the elite—that of those in power—the way it was gained and the way that it was used and then distributed which has brought about this image given to Amos in our text. The judgment pronounced is severe: songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day, says the Lord God. What comes next are the accusations that Amos makes against those in power in Israel; the list of things which have caused God’s anger against them. The people in power in Israel, Amos accuses, have created a system which perpetuates injustice. Verse 4: Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land.” He goes further by saying that even though they fulfill the details of the worship rituals, they are not worshiping God but have

self interest on their minds saying: Verse 5: When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?" They have oriented everything about themselves to how they can exploit one another for monetary gain by altering the standards (verse 5b); "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." The system was set up to ensure power remained with the powerful; to perpetuate the wealth of the already wealthy, and to do both at the expense of the poor and the powerless. In these statements, Amos sums up the basis for the God's anger. Amos, a Judean, is clearly standing outside their community, making observations about their behavior: "Hear this, You that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land...." He goes on with descriptions of their behaviors, quoting things that they say and do which are counter to the ways of justice and equity found in the revealed ways of God. Amos does not specify exactly who it is that is trampling on the needy, who it is that is bringing to ruin the poor of the land—it is anyone who practices injustice. In the rather extensive list given connections are made between various practices of their daily lives which have all led to a society which no longer actually worships their God even while participating in the designated religious festivals and observances. These people have separated their perceived duty to God from the way they live Monday through Saturday. They are present regularly for Sunday morning Sunday School and worship services, but they do not carry what they know of God's will for human behavior toward others into their daily life. It seems that Amos is pointing out for us, not just for that 8th century audience, that God sees their behavior as wrong. It seems that the justice (and holiness) which God has demanded of those God has claimed as belonging to the covenant was not fulfilled through Sabbath offerings or religious festival observances. The covenant relationship was fulfilled in the way people lived their everyday lives and treated all those around them—including the needy and the poor. The interesting and crucial question for us as we view this passage is where do we place ourselves in this narrative? How does this vision of summer fruit and the accusations which follow apply to us? Is this simply a matter of individually keeping ourselves from unjust actions? Of making sure we are not unfairly taking advantage of someone else? If those are the steps we need to take, then we can probably do this pretty well. We don't set prices in the market place or determine product purity, like the examples here. But if we examine the situation at a broader level, what happens? We can position ourselves outside the "systems" of big banks, of the Wall Street finance system, of large corporations that have deceitful business practices which have victimized many. After all, we are just ordinary folks and don't have much power to change their behavior. We don't make decisions that have that much influence. The reality of our complex world is that we actually do participate in many inter-related systems, not all of which run on precepts that would be acceptable if God's plumb line were placed in their midst. Some within our society work toward creating a more just and equitable world; some try to alleviate injustice and inequalities while others just ignore them; but some want to perpetuate those things because they benefit from them; some want to create and aggravate divisions, distrust, fear and hostility because that obscures underlying injustice and obscures their role in it. Too often the finger pointing which sounds most loudly today is heard as if it is coming from Amos viewpoint—from outside the circle of the accused; yet often in our world it is not quite that simple. It may not have been that simple even in ancient times, but it is surely not that simple

now. We too often hear this message of Amos as a dualistic one; not a multi-layered complex one. We believe we stand firmly outside the system that violates God's ways with Amos and can join with Amos pointing our fingers. Instead, we need to realize that we are actually embedded within the system—just as Judah is later judged lacking in God's eyes for having the same flaws which Amos now points out in Israel's society. We are a part of the society in which we live. The systems—the society—the culture—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. Therefore as a society, we are participating in both—we are doing both. What we are called to do by our faith—by being in covenant relationship with God and disciples of our Lord—is to work—to actively participate in the effort to increase the one and to decrease or eliminate the other—in our lives—in our actions toward those we encounter, not only by what we do, but how we react to what they say and do. It is important to note that God does not condemn the marketplace itself—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. Our reading began with an indictment for Israel's sin. It ends with a pronouncement of a dire fate—all their feast 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, writer of numerous books on our culture and the current state of faith has one entitled "When God is Silent." In it she writes, "Silence is God's last defense against our idolatry." That seems to be what happened to Israel, it may be what is happening to us. When people no longer can hear God's word because the lives they are living and the things they value are so far from what God desires, then their lives become empty and dark. When lives become empty and dark, only God can restore light. Jesus affirms that the things that we learn of God through the prophets have not changed; that the scriptures have not changed. The covenant law still applies. We are still called to live in obedience to God by loving God and each other. We know nothing can separate us from God's love. We are called to go forward within the light of that love, fulfilling what God has always asked of us as stated simply in Micah 6:8-- Do Justice, Love kindness and walk humbly with our Lord. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.