

Scriptures: Colossians 1:15-28; Amos 8:1-12

Writers and Word-plays

We've been looking at some of the Old Testament prophets in this sermon series, "Prophet Margins." Two weeks ago we heard from Elisha, who called us to listen. Last week we heard from Amos, who called us to look and see. This week, we're going to hear from him again, and consider what it is that our Father would have us examine in the world today. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Amos 8:1-12. **Read Amos 8:1-12.**

Last week we heard Amos tell the King of Israel, and Amaziah, his priest, that they would face judgment at God's hands. Amos also told them the kingdom of Israel would be carried off into exile. This week, Amos elaborates further on the vision God gives him, again on judgment – this time not only on the northern kingdom of Israel, but also on the whole world.

The writers of the Bible, and especially of the Old Testament, loved playing with words. They used a lot of word-plays and puns to make their points, which have been lost in translation, and also lost because of the distance in time our culture is today from the culture of the initial hearers of the word. I want to give you a couple examples of modern-day word-plays so you understand what I'm talking about. "My wife said there were moose falling from the sky. I told her, 'It was just reindeer.'"

"You should wear glasses while doing math, it improves division." "Need an ark? I Noah guy." "Waking up this morning was an eye-opening experience." You see where this is going? There are many humorous things contained in Holy Scripture, which we miss due to distance in time and the translation into our language.

Plucking Sour Grapes

"This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. 'What do you see, Amos?' He asked. 'A basket of ripe fruit,' I answered. Then the Lord said to me, 'The time is ripe for My people Israel; I will spare them no longer,'" (Amos 8:1-2). These two verses contain a play on words in the original Hebrew text. Specifically, the original words used for "ripe fruit," and "the time is ripe." It had a connotation of grapes on a vine ready to pluck. What do you do with ripe grapes on a vine? If you like them, I mean? You see them, and assuming you've got permission or they're yours, you pluck them and eat them. And they're gone.

For years, I'd watch people with kids grab bags of seedless grapes from the Produce Department in Kroger, and start eating them right in the store without paying. The Produce and the Meat Departments are right beside each other in there. And

people – they hadn't paid for them – but they'd give them to their kids anyhow to keep them corralled in the shopping cart and quiet. That's theft. Shoplifting, specifically. The price is based on the weight in the package, and if half the bag's gone, then they only pay half price, even though they ate some of it already.

That made me so mad – still does. It's dishonest. People wonder why the cost on food keeps going up – it's partially due to folks doing this sort of stuff. They have to raise the price to cover the losses due to theft. Anyhow, back to the word play in Amos – God's going to pluck the sour, distasteful nation of Israel, like we would grapes on a vine, and the country will completely vanish. And it did!

The northern kingdom of Israel – those ten tribes in the north – went into exile in Assyria in about three stages under Pul, Tiglath-pileser, and Shalmaneser V, who repopulated the area with other ethnic groups loyal to Assyria. Seven hundred years later, these people would become the Samaritans Jesus talked about when He told the parable of the Good Samaritan. Israel was plucked from world history – from the map – for close to three thousand years before showing up after World War II as a home for the Jewish people – most of whom are descendants of the two tribes which formed the southern Kingdom of Judah. When God says He's going to do something, you can count on Him keeping His word!

Wailing Wall

“In that day,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies – flung everywhere! Silence!’” (verse 3), Amos records. I can think of at least three, possibly four, times in history when this happened. First, in the northern kingdom – that temple at Bethel which we talked about last week where they worshiped a golden calf – when the ten tribes were carried off to Assyria around 700 years before Jesus was born. The second instance is when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the southern Kingdom of Judah was carried into exile in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, a little over a hundred years later.

The third was after the temple in Jerusalem – rebuilt by Ezra and Nehemiah about 500 years before Jesus' birth – was again pillaged and desecrated by the Seleucid Greek Antiochus IV Epiphanes about 150 years before Jesus was born. This caused the Jews to revolt – led by the Maccabeus family. There are texts – called the Apocrypha – which are not part of our Bible, but they contain some of the historical events and details of things which happened in Jerusalem and Judea between the events in the Old and New Testaments. The fourth time in history when the songs turned to wailing in the Temple would have been around 70AD, when Rome completely destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. What's left of it, even today, is known as “The Wailing Wall.”

When God says He's going to do something in Scripture, friends, we can take it to the bank! He keeps His word! Notice what God tells Amos next. "Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?' – skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales," (verses 4-5). God's not saying Amos tramples the poor and needy – He's saying that the corrupt religious and political leadership of the northern Kingdom of Israel is. God loves the poor. He makes this very clear in Scripture.

Look friends, the Book of Job is probably the oldest written text – Bible scholars suggest that it's the oldest text of the Bible. Meaning, it was written down before the Book of Genesis. Job would have been contemporaneous with Abraham. It goes way back. Listen to what Job says about the poor. "Can he who hates justice govern? Will you condemn the just and mighty One? Is He not the One who says to kings, 'You are worthless,' and to nobles, 'You are wicked,' who shows no partiality to princes and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of His hands?" (Job 34:17-19).

God Made and Loves All People

Job got it – he knew God was impartial in His dealings with people – that He made each of them. James, one of the apostles who walked with Jesus wrote, "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be the rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him?" (Jas. 2:5). The poor – who are rich in faith – inherit God's kingdom. That's powerful stuff!

See, the folks in Amos' day, they wanted a flashy, showy sort of religion. They want to have all the spectacular displays. The gold trappings, the fine clothes, the fancy robes, and of course we can't forget, the golden calf. And look what they say – "When will the New Moon and the Sabbath be over?" Those were a couple holy days in their religious calendar. We wouldn't say that today. In our day, it would be akin to something like, "When is worship going to be over?" Or maybe, "When is the preacher going to stop preaching?"

They want to get the service over and done with, so they can go about the things they want to do – sell their grain and wheat. To be clear, it's not just about wanting to be involved in commerce – these people are actually wanting to rip people off! God says their "skimping the measure, boosting the price, and cheating with dishonest scales." We see some of that sort of thing happening – primarily at the gas pumps – and look at how angry people get!

At the onset of Covid-19, people made a mad dash to all the stores – remember that? They bought up all the toilet paper. There was none to be found. I remember

going into Walmart, and they had signs up – limit of two packs per person. Do any of you remember that? Then these people, who had went in and bought massive quantities just before the Covid shutdown started listing it for sale on line. One guy was selling hand sanitizer or something for \$80 a bottle. Well, he eventually got nailed for price gouging – and ended up paying a hefty fine.

The Sweepings with the Wheat

God continues telling Amos what the people have done wrong, in verse 6, “buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.” The Bible is a great resource for us – and all these stories connect us to Jesus, and connect with each other, if we take time to read and think about them. Closer to the beginning of the Bible, there’s a book known as the Book of Ruth. It’s about a Moabite woman whose husband dies unexpectedly, and she comes back to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi is really old, while Ruth is a young woman.

Life, for women, was tough in Old Testament times. If your husband died, and you had no male children, you didn’t have any property or property rights. So, as it turned out Naomi had a relative named Boaz. Because Ruth and Naomi were destitute, Ruth would go out into the fields each morning with Boaz’ hired men to collect the grain which had fallen as they were gathering in the harvest. “As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, ‘Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.’ So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening,” (Ruth 2:15-17).

Ultimately, Boaz would marry Ruth, and the two of them would be the great-grandparents of King David. God was mad at the people in Amos’ day, because not only were they dishonest in how they were measuring, but they were also not leaving anything in the fields for those destitute among them to glean. They were actually sweeping up dirt, rocks, pebbles – stuff people can’t eat – and counting it as part of the weight of the wheat they were selling to people who were already hard-pressed to make ends meet! Talk about a dirty deal!

Earthquakes and Darkness

God speaks about Himself next in our passage. “The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: ‘I will never forget anything they have done,’” (Amos 8:7). Israel took great pride in the fact that God was its God – even though the country continually turned its back on Him. He says though, that He won’t forget anything they’ve done. We talked a little last week about an age of judgment – it’s coming! When Jesus comes again, people better be prepared to give an accounting!

Amos continues saying what God has said, “Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile; it will be stirred up and

then sink like the river of Egypt,” (verse 8). Lands trembling. Land rising up, and then quickly dropping – what does that sound like, Church? An earthquake. If you go back to the first verse of Amos’ book, he tells us, “The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa – what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel,” (Amos 1:1).

God’s making it clear to Amos that an earthquake’s going to happen. By the time Amos wrote his book down, it was already a done deal. “‘In that day,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your religious feasts into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day,’” (Amos 8:9-10). A lot of people read these couple verses, and say, “That hasn’t happened yet.”

Events of Good Friday

Some people think it’s the Final Judgment. Earlier in the book, Amos talks about the day of the Lord. He says, “That day will be darkness, not light,” (5:18), and “Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light – pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?” (5:20). Friends, I don’t think it’s Judgment Day that Amos is talking about, with what he describes in our text. I think he’s talking about Jesus.

Luke records, “It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ When He had said this, He breathed His last,” (Lk. 23:44-46). When that curtain tore in the temple – it allowed all the people who were there that day to see into the space known as the Holy of Holies – the throne room of God on Earth. It was such a sacred place, that the high priest was only allowed to enter it on one day each year. Can you imagine the Jews’ religious leaders reactions that day to seeing that?

They would have been wailing. They would have ripped their fancy robes. They would have sat in sackcloth and ashes. We have recorded in Scripture a time when Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb. When Jesus died for the sins of the whole world on the cross of Good Friday, I’m certain that God the Father wept. His only begotten Son, killed for the sins of every person who ever lived.

I’m a parent. Many of you are also parents. I can’t imagine letting any of my children take the fall for another in the way Christ took it for us. But God did. “What wondrous love is this, O my soul!” as the hymnist wrote!

Famine for God's Word

“The days are coming,’ declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it,” (Amos 8:11-12). In times of great distress Israel would turn back to God for a prophetic word of hope or guidance. What God is telling the people, through Amos, is that there’s a judgment coming, and when they cry out to Him, rather than restoring them, He’s going to be silent.

They’ll hunger and thirst for His word, and even search for it, but not find it. We aren’t there yet, friends. But look around at how the world is today. The politicking in the Church. The rich continuing to get richer, while the poor get poorer. The fractured divisions of human institutions. The unwillingness of the nations to work and live harmoniously together. If all this were a tea kettle it would be whistling!

What all these situations need is restored relationship with and through Jesus Christ. And you can’t have that on your terms. God is not a Duane “the Rock” Johnson tooth fairy type Person who we have the option of wheeling and dealing with so that we can get our wings – or get rid of Duane’s wings, as the movie goes. God makes His expectations of His bride very clear in Scripture. His bride, of course, is the Church. And we’re part of it. He expects us to be faithful followers and lovers of Jesus Christ, and we do that by loving God and loving neighbor – which is an all-encompassing term for all people, whether we like them or not.

Prayer: Ever-faithful God, whose being is perfect righteousness; reconcile us in Your Son with the helpless and the needy, with those we would ignore or oppress, and with those we have called enemies, that we may serve all people as Your hands of love, and sit at the feet of those who need our compassionate care. Amen.