

Thus Says the Lord

8th Weekend after Pentecost – July 9/10, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Amos 1:1-2, 4:13, 8:1-3 (NRSV)

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

²And he said:

The LORD roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither,
and the top of Carmel dries up.

¹³For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind,
reveals his thoughts to mortals,
makes the morning darkness,
and treads on the heights of the earth—
the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!

This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit.

²He 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 never again pass them by.

³The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,”
says the Lord GOD;

“the dead bodies shall be many,
cast out in every place. Be silent!”

If any of the pages of your Bible are still stuck together, they are probably in the books of the prophets, especially those with the odd names like Obadiah, Nahum, and Zechariah. Today, we will meet Amos, as we seek to understand better the role of the prophets in the story of God's people.

Reading the books of the prophets can be quite a challenge. We want to sit down and read them from beginning to end but soon realize that can be downright confusing. This is not a new problem. Martin Luther once wrote, “the prophets have a queer way of talking, like people who instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble from one thing to the next so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.” There are a couple of things we can do to help ourselves.

First, as in all bible study, context is essential. Who is Amos? When did he live? Where? What was going on at the time? Second, we need some help in grasping the structure of the prophetic books. Generally, the prophetic books are collections of “oracles,” which are individual prophetic messages. These oracles might be oracles of salvation or oracles of punishment or expressions of God's sorrow and disappointment with his people. A good study bible will help you to see the beginning and end of oracles in these books. By their nature, it can be hard to see structure in the books of the prophets. At times, it is hard even for the scholars, so don't hesitate to get some help. You'll better understand why these books have been cherished by God's people for millennia.

Context ~ boom times

We often imagine the prophets to be odd, long-haired, rather unkempt men standing on the street corners of ancient Israel carrying signs proclaiming the end of the world. Well, as with most stereotypes there is a grain of truth in that image, though the OT prophets were hesitant to use the word “the end.” Still, it would certainly be much easier to carry such a sign when times are bad and threats seem to be around every corner. But the first of Israel's so-called “writing prophets” was a man named Amos, who lived during peaceful boom times yet saw the darkness that lay ahead.

Ripe Fruit and Prophets

Our third passage from Amos is one of his visions. It is built upon a wordplay in the Hebrew, which gets obscured in the NRSV translation.

Amos sees a basket of “ripe fruit.” God then tells Amos that “my people Israel” are ripe themselves. Ripe for what? Ripe for the destruction which they are bringing on themselves. The visions and the imagery of the prophets are often pretty easy to understand. We may not like the message, but we understand it.

When we read the books of the prophets, we need to remember that God employed them to bring God's word to the people of God. Their role was not to foretell future events, to be a bunch of little “Nostradamuses,” it was to tell forth the word of God. They were *forthtellers* not *foretellers*.

Frankly, it doesn't take a crystal ball to know that when we turn away from God and God's ways then bad consequences will follow. Amos warned about the people's complacent self-indulgence. It was clear where such idolatry would lead.

In the eighth century BC, the Assyrian empire posed an ever-growing threat to the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. With Assyria their immediate neighbor to their northeast, this pressure fell hardest on Israel. Nonetheless, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity at times. One of those periods was from about 785BC to 745BC under King Jeroboam. It would be short lived. Twenty years or so after Jeroboam's death (722BC to be exact) the Assyrians overran the kingdom of Israel, wiping it from the map and exiling tens of thousands of the Israelites.¹

In the period of peace before the fall, Amos, a herdsman, brought God's word to the kingdom of Israel. Working some time around 760BC, Amos understood the consequences of Israel's growing complacency and abandonment of God. Using the bold imagery preferred by God's prophets, Amos dared to use the language of a lament over a young person's death to describe the coming death of Israel. "Fallen, no more to rise, is maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up" (Amos 5:1-2). For someone to die young and unmarried with no children to carry on the name was a source of deep sadness to the people of ancient Israel. You can imagine how well his message must have been received by the Israelites! Amos not only lamented the coming death of Israel, he used strong and original language to describe the coming exile: "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land" (Amos 7:11).

Why would this happen to Israel? We could leave God out of our explanation entirely, noting that Assyria was powerful and simply could not be stopped from their aggression. But this is not the biblical understanding. For Amos, Israel was no better or no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. Israel was living according the ways of the world just like everyone else! In contrast, the Bible offers us stark choices, black-and-white choices, between the way of God and the way of the world – the way of the wise and the way of the foolish.

From Amos 3: "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you [Israel] . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities." Simply put, God expected more from his people. He held them to a higher standard, the standard of the covenant he had made with them. For Israel to be accused of oppressing the poor, as Amos accused them, was no small matter. In failing to care for the needy while resting in the luxuries of their own prosperity, Israel revealed the depth of their sin and the abandonment of their special relationship with Yahweh, their Lord and God. Such abandonment could lead only one place – to their destruction. Israel had forgotten that they were to care for the widow because God had cared for them. They had forgotten that they were to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Structure

There are four major categories of material in book of Amos. They are, in order of quantity: (1) sayings spoken by the prophet himself; (2) first-person accounts of visions; (3) a third-person account of opposition Amos experienced at Bethel; and (4) excerpts from an old hymn. Amos is organized into the first group of oracles, 1:2–6:14; the visions, with related narrative, 7:1–8:3; and, the final group of oracles, 8:4–9:15. The content of the book goes something like this:²

- 1:2–3:8 The Lion's roar: universal judgment and its grounds
- 3:9–6:14 An enemy around the land: the Lord's anger
- 7:1–9:15 The Lord God: judgment and hope

Even this simple guide to the structure of Amos would be a big help when you set out to read the book. The oracles may seem like a hodge-podge, but there is structure underneath that helps us to grasp the message.

The books of the prophets highlight the value of having a good study Bible. Our bookstore has several. A good entry-level choice is the *Access Bible*. A somewhat more advanced study Bible is the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*. These both use the NRSV translation and both do a good job of helping you with historical and literary context, as well as structure.

¹The ten Israelite tribes that made up the northern kingdom would be "lost" forever, never again to be a national entity of any sort. These would be the lost tribes of Israel.

²This outline is from Douglas Stuart's commentary in the *Word Biblical Commentary*. Other scholars will outline the book somewhat differently.

Daily Bible Readings

(the book of Amos, as outlined by Donald Gowan in *The New Interpreter's Bible*)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Amos 1:1 – 2:6 The divine warrior	Day 2 Amos 3:1 – 4:13, Israel's inability to hear; Amos 5, The death of Israel
Day 3 Amos 6, Life as usual – disaster near; Amos 7, Visions and a confrontation	Day 4 Amos 8, The end has come
Day 5 Amos 9:1-6, No escape; 9:7-10, Lord of all; 9:11-15 After the judgment	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Questions for God

A new Sunday morning four-week teaching series with Scott Engle

9:30 in Wesley Hall – begins **next** week: July 17th

In April, Rev. Hasley asked the congregation to write on an index card the one question they would most like to ask God. We had nearly 150 responses. We've reviewed and organized the questions. Beginning July 17th, Rev. Halsey will preach a four-week sermon series in which he will begin tackling some of the questions. Also, Scott Engle will teach a four week series at 9:30 in Wesley Hall on the questions for God.

St. Andrew Summer Lectures – continues tomorrow, Monday, July 11

Each summer, we offer a casual summer series. This year, we are meeting on the *second Mondays*. There is no sign-up required. Just come down to Piro Hall around 6:45 or so. We'll have refreshments and spend a little time getting to know one another. Scott Engle's lecture will start at 7pm. We'll wrap up no later than 8:30. Childcare is available. Our next two topics will be:

July 11: "Amazing Grace"

August 8: "Being Right, Wrong, and Righteous"

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Evidently, there was no shortage of prophets during the age of the kings. 1 Kings 22 tells of what seems to be hundred of prophets in the court of King Jehoshaphat. The entire retinue told Jehoshaphat what he wanted to hear – that the king would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail. One mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

In his notes on Kings in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Claude Mariottini outlines several tests that separate true prophets from false prophets. These include (1) Is the prophet willing to tell the community what they don't want to hear?, (2) Is the prophet vindicated by what actually happens?, and (3) Does the prophet lead people toward or way from worship of the one true God? Finally, "the most trustworthy prophet is the one who will seek guidance from the LORD; who will share with the community what has been seen and heard; and who will continue with the community to test and clarify the word, open always to further guidance."

If a prophet is called by God to tell the people what they don't want to hear, the obvious question is "Will we listen?" You might discuss your own experience with the books of the prophets. Have you ever read any? If not, why not? Are there parts of the books of the prophets that we try to tune out or believe have no significance for us? If so, it is probably all the warnings and words of judgment. Yet, what sort of loving Father would hold back warnings if he saw his beloved children heading over a cliff to certain doom? How can we learn a new appreciation for the books of the prophets and come to see their messages of judgment and of hope being messages for us all?