

GRACE IN JUDGMENT - Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42
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A Sermon By
The Rev. Dr. Paul O. Boger, Sr.

This is summer; a time to be bright, relaxed, laid back.
Who needs a dark text like this one in Amos?

Amos, the farmer from down South, has been called by God to begin again, to start his life over, to become a prophet, a voice for God. God is about to speak to his people. Yet what God has to say is harsh indeed.

Amos speaks of a time coming when the sky shall be dark.

There will be no light.

All will be silent.

There will be no word from the Lord.

Previously, people have concerned themselves about famine, a lack of food.

Now Amos tells them to worry about a famine of the word, a time when God falls silent and refuses to speak to the people.

These harsh words of Amos seem so out of character for the God of Israel. The God of Israel is a talkative God.

The whole story of the world begins when God begins to talk. God speaks in Genesis, and the world springs into being by the very word of God.

God speaks and Israel comes into being.

God comes to Abraham on a starlit night and speaks to him, promises to make a great people of Abraham's family.

God spoke to Moses, the prophets, kings, Mary, Joseph, Peter, Paul.

Yes, the whole Bible can be seen as one long conversation between God and humanity, a conversation always initiated by God, the God who keeps coming back to us asking, "Where are you?" We even refer to the Bible as the word of God.

Of today's reading from Amos we might ask:

What on earth caused God's wrath?

Why is God so angry?

We ought to note well the specific reasons for God's unprecedented wrath.

Is God angry because Israel has not fulfilled the cultic requirements? No.

Is there something wrong with Israel's worship? No.

Have they failed to follow the rubrics in the prayer

book? No.

Or perhaps Israel has misinterpreted the Scriptures. Has there been some sort of interpretive failure that has angered God? No.

Have those entrusted with interpreting the word of God gotten it wrong? No.

Has there been a failure of prayer? No.

Some inadequacies in music? No.

Amos mentions none of this.

Rather, that which has angered God so severely is pure economics.

God is upset over business.

The poor have been victimized by the rich.

People can scarcely wait to get out of worship before they can return to their business of buying and selling grain at the highest possible profit.

The poor have become the virtual slaves of the rich, so horribly, deeply in debt that they can never climb out.

I don't know why we have to apologize to those who think that Christianity is mostly a "spiritual" religion. Christians tend to be very materialistic, that is, very concerned with mundane money matters. Come to a session meeting, think about our annual meetings: budget, mission,

salaries, program are driven by economics.

Mission and Program are money.

Without it we are dead in the water.

Sometimes we wish that church really could be more "spiritual" but no, the God of Israel is Lord of all, including economics. This God is not just interested in our vague, religious sentiments on Sunday. This God cares about our pots and pans, our dollars and cents, our many tasks, our worrying over many things, the way we make our money, the way we spend our money -- business.

A couple of years ago, it was revealed that the president of a major investment firm made a yearly salary into many millions of dollars. During that same year, he led a process of "downsizing" in which thousands of the firms workers were fired or laid off. When confronted by a TV reporter, he said, "This is a private matter, a business matter." To him, it wasn't a moral issue. It certainly did not seem like a religious issue.

And yet, in the light of today's Scripture, his salary -- by any standard, immense salary -- coupled with the shoddy treatment of his workers and their jobs *is* a spiritual, religious, and moral issue.

During one of our family gatherings we began to talk

about economics, our discussion included many of our multi-millionaire sports figures who are always in the news one way or the other.

At one point in the conversation my brother said, "When is somebody in America going to stand up and say it is *wrong*, just simply wrong for executives to be making salaries in the millions while their workers' salaries stagnate and sports figures make equivalent figures while public education, hunger, homelessness are nearly disastrous?"

I recall reading somewhere that over the past ten years or so the salaries of top executives and major sport's figure's rose at around 15 or 20 percent a year, while workers' salaries were rising between 2 and 3 percent a year.

Amos says God cares about this. God is refusing to speak to Israel because of economic abuses.

Sometimes it seems as if we live in a period where there is a "famine of the word." God seems very far from modern, 21st-century people. We say that the reasons may be that we are too busy for God, that we are skeptical, scientific, critically thinking people.

Perhaps that's the problem.

I wonder what Amos would say?

Perhaps Amos would say the reasons are more basic,

more fundamental, more economic. We have compartmentalized our lives.

Over here we are doing business. Business is business.

Over there, one hour a week, maybe a few minutes each day, we're spiritual we're religious.

And our various compartmentalized worlds never meet. But not in today's Scripture. Here, the Bible gets very specific, excruciatingly economic.

And God is angry.

A few years back, I attended a roundtable discussion at the Presbyterian United Nations office in NYC. This meeting included several clergy and laypeople from churches in other parts of the world. Our table was blessed with an African bishop. I won't even begin to try and pronounce his African name and I wish I had a photo of his bright multi-colored garment; it was spectacular. During the roundtable discussion, the bishop was asked, "What do you think is the greatest challenge faced by young people today?"

The bishop responded, "Perhaps it is because I am visiting North America, but I would say the greatest challenge, I believe, is your materialism. Here, there seems to be so much, so much of everything. Christianity does not

do well in such a climate. Where life is filled with so much, there is not enough room for God to get in. Money is always the problem, according to Scripture, never the solution."

Is this what Amos is speaking about when he says that, in an Israel of riches and great wealth, there will come a famine, not a famine of things and possessions, but a famine of the word of God. More possessions -- less word of God?

On this mid-July day, in the lazy, hazy, hot, humid days of summer, we hear a harsh, direct, specific word, a word that is meant to provoke rigorous self-examination in each of us.

Where will we go after this service of worship?

What concerns will consume us?

What desires will eat away at our marriages, our family life, our relationships to other people?

What responsibility do we have for the poor and the less fortunate in our society?

How have we, or even have we voted, in recent elections? Have we supported our own self-interest, or have we shown concern for others?

Here, therefore, is a word of judgment. And yet, behind this tough text from Amos is a word of grace. Though it may be difficult, we ought to give thanks that our God cares

enough about us to speak the truth to us. Our God, thank God, does not keep his word in this text. This God does not remain silent. This God sends truthful prophets like Amos to us to grab our attention, to speak the truth, painful though it may be.

We may have come to our Lord's Table today looking for comfort, for peace, calm, and reassurance. Many Sundays, that is what we find at the Table. But this Sunday, what is found here is also the truth.

We are not being left to your own devices.

We may wonder why there is a gnawing sense of unfulfillment in us, why there are problems in our towns, cities, nation, personal life, work. This text in Amos loves us enough to name it, to name it as greed, materialism, insensitivity.

Like Martha we can be distracted with so much "serving" so much materialism, so much of everything. We can become anxious and troubled over things and lose sight of the one thing which is needful, "the good portion," the Word of God in our presence.

For this word of truthfulness from Amos and Jesus, I suppose we ought to be thankful