

## AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL BASKET

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Amos 8

Back in mid-July, the Courtneys and I were driving home from a trip to south Alabama where we had been visiting my parents and cousins and other family. We were about halfway home when we decided to swap drivers. So, I pulled over at the first opportunity which happened to be the rest area in Clanton, Alabama. We pulled into the parking area and stopped. A few spaces further along was a pickup truck with a guy sitting beside it in a lawn chair. The bed of the truck was filled with baskets of peaches. It took me a moment to realize that, of course, we were in Clanton, the home of several renowned peach farms. I walked over, said hi to the man, and picked out a basket of beautiful, ripe peaches, and I paid for them. The man assured me that they had been picked that morning “over yonder,” he pointed.

We got home, set the basket on the kitchen counter, and started eating. The peaches were delicious—ripe and sweet and fresh. We knew we had only a few days to enjoy them before they got over-ripe and turned squishy and brown. My daughter made peach cobbler, we had peaches over cereal and oatmeal, we cut up peaches for lunch and dinner until they were all gone. It was a treat.

There is nothing better than local, tender, fresh-picked fruit in-season bursting with sweetness and flavor—bell peppers, squash, corn, beans, strawberries, peaches, tomatoes. To me, there is nothing more heavenly than a basket filled with the gifts of the soil.

In our reading for today from the book of Amos, the prophet describes a vision he has in which God shows Amos a basket of summer fruit.

The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century BC. He was a resident of the kingdom of Judah but was called by God to venture north and proclaim God's word to the kingdom of Israel. Amos does as God commands.

In this vision in our reading, God shows Amos this basket filled with *summer fruit*. Then God declares, *The end has come upon my people Israel*. There is a crucial connection between *summer fruit* and *the end* that we can't see in English. In Hebrew, however, the two words sound almost exactly alike. It's not unlike our words 'quite' and 'quiet.' The wordplay would be obvious to those hearing Amos' words in Hebrew. They would say, “I get it. ‘Summer fruit’ and ‘the end.’” In this vision, summer fruit represents the harvest, and the end points towards judgment. *The end has come upon my people Israel*. Through this vision, God is warning the people of Israel that God's judgment is upon them.

The vision begins with the appealing image of a basket of ripe fruit, but the mood quickly shifts from the joy of delicious food to the prospect of being harvested and judged. This judgement will be harsh. People will suffer. First of all, God warns that God *will never again pass them by*. This means that God's mercy and forgiveness will no longer be available to the people of Israel.

This is our eighth sermon from the book of Amos, and if you have listened to even one of my sermons then you know that Amos' words are directed at the wealthy and powerful of Israel—people who have used their position to corrupt the system for their own profit. In today's reading, Amos continues his indictments of these people with the charge that they *have trampled on the needy; they bring to ruin the poor of the land*. Amos then focuses on the merchants, especially those who resent the Sabbath and holy days because those days prohibit commerce. There is no profit on the Sabbath. These merchants cheat their customers with false weights and balances. They sell the husk and label it wheat. They poor that fall behind are quickly sold into debt slavery for negligible amounts of money. These are their sins and crimes of these people and God swears that he will *never forget* what they have done. God will bring devastation on the land because of them. God will send a famine, but not a famine of food, but a famine of God's holy word. No longer shall God speak to these people. They may roam the land from border to border but they will not find God's word. It will be gone. They will be alone. This is God's judgment.

As I have mentioned before, God's judgment is not for the purpose of punishment. God takes no pleasure from these actions. God simply desires to get the people's attention. They have turned their backs to God and will not listen. There is no relationship if they won't listen. God brings earthquakes and floods in and effort to get their attention.

Even today, drastic measures are required to get the attention of those who feel they are above the reach of the system, those who have plenty yet want more.

This week, for example, we learned that the actress Lori Loughlin and her husband received prison sentences for paying bribes to get their daughters admitted into the University of Southern California. At the sentencing, the judge said that Loughlin "was focused on getting what she wanted, no matter how and no matter the cost." He said prison time was necessary to send a message that "everyone, no matter your status, is accountable in our justice system."<sup>1</sup> Those that Amos rails against are already wealthy and privileged and yet they continue to corrupt the system. They *who afflict the righteous, [they] who take a bribe, [they who] push the needy out of their way*.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/21/judge-says-full-house-actor-lori-loughlin-must-serve-two-months-for-college-bribery-scheme.html>

Today's sermon is the eighth of nine sermons from the book of Amos. As we have discovered, this book is a challenging component of our holy scripture. Nothing in Amos is easy and sometimes reading his words feels like someone is smacking you in the back with a 2-by-4 over and over.

But what that has bothered me most as I have preached these sermons is that although Amos indicts the wealthy and powerful of Israel for their sins against the poor and the vulnerable, I have felt guilty preaching this to you, the members of this congregation. You are good people. As far as I know, you are not out there cheating the poor and taking advantage of the vulnerable. In fact, right now this church is struggling to figure out how to better respond to the growing needs of our community as COVID rolls across our land. The restrictions placed on us by distancing add new layers of challenge. This past Friday night, a group of you fed 37 homeless people. This afternoon, we're holding our second food drive of the summer. Recently, we hosted a blood drive. The church makes regular financial contributions to various organizations in the county. You are all responding with heroic efforts. And I am filled with remorse if my sermons imply that you aren't. You are not like those of ancient Israel who *sell the needy for a pair of sandals, who bring ruin to the poor of the land.*

However, this week, as I wrestled with this reading, I believe I may have figured something out. As American Christians, we tend to take an individualistic view of our faith. We say, "My salvation is determined by my actions, by how I lead my life. Your sins are your problem. I am not responsible for your transgressions."

But Amos sees things differently. He views the faith of Israel collectively—everyone is in it together. They are all the children of God.

And this, I believe, is more of what God has in mind for us. If we view the wealthy and powerful as the predators, then that makes the poor just victims and removes their power. While the poor and vulnerable may be injured by the actions of the powerful, they are not powerless. They are people. We would be wrong to deny them their power. We would be wrong to view them as anything less than fully human. God is with them. They have faith. They have power.

This summer, we have witnessed protests across our nation. People are collectively lifting up their voices and saying, "Stop. I will not be a victim. I have power."

Amos is not delivering God's word of judgment only to the wealthy and powerful of Israel. He brings it to all the people of Israel. The sins of the people are the sins of the nation. All are responsible. When we tolerate sin in the system, all have sinned. We are all peaches in a basket. A bruise on one peach affects us all.

As I have preached these sermons to you, I'm not saying that you have sinned but that we are all part of a greater whole of God's people. As we read the words of the prophet, we must realize that together we are God's people.

The recurring theme through Amos is justice. Amos demands justice for all people, not just a few. As the rapper who goes by the name Common sings, "Justice for all ain't specific enough." Amos would agree. Amos demands that justice wash over the land like an unstoppable river, or else all shall be judged.

Even if we don't ourselves feel the sting of injustice in our lives, Amos calls us to fight injustice wherever it may fester. We are God's people, all of us. Amen.