

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Luke 10:38-42; Colossians 1:15-28

Amos 8:1-12 is the fourth vision that is given to Amos the prophet, and it is by far the most horrible. In the vision, Yahweh shows Amos a basket of summer fruit, the apex, culmination and end of the harvest. Then God says to Amos, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by” (vs. 2b).

The report of this vision is, in reality, a skillful play on words. The Hebrew for “summer fruit” is “qayits” and for “end” is “qets”. In other words, Amos is stating that “summer fruit”, while appearing to be the manifestation of the fecundity of Israel is, in reality, the end of harvest and thus the end of the nation. Israel’s finest hour is also their final hour!

And what a final hour it will be. God declares through Amos that the northern kingdom will be so decimated that the people will never pass in review before Yahweh again, its temple and palace will be leveled, and its capital city will be filled with the bodies of its dead (vss. 2-3). In other words, what Amos is predicting here is not simply the defeat of Israel, but its total annihilation, so that it will never appear on the face of the earth again.¹

And why will Israel be annihilated? It will be annihilated, first, because of the extremity of its social injustice. “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale? 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” (vss. 4-6).

What is described here is the extreme exploitation of the poor, driven by an insatiable greed of the nation’s merchants and wealthy. The lust for profit will be so great on the part of the Israelites, Amos is saying, that they can hardly wait for their religious holidays to be over so that they can start trading again. And in all that they do, they will seek to maximize their profit. Those involved in any commerce will tamper with weights and measures, will adulterate wheat with chaff thus cheating the buyer, and will even seek to buy human beings at the cheapest price possible. If they have to cheat the poor or the vulnerable in order to increase their wealth, they will do so. No shady deal is too little in order to exploit the poor and thus enhance their own well being. The nation has become so obsessed with making money that they will disregard all the Mosaic laws designed to equitably balance wealth and to eliminate poverty (Lev. 19:36; Deut. 25:14), Amos reports. Thus, this nation that had been called out of Egypt by God to build an economy of shared wealth in which poverty was only a distant memory had, instead, become the most rapacious and exploitive nation on earth, demonically possessed by its own greed. And for that sin, it deserves to die!

¹ Groaning under the heavy economic burden of Solomon’s Israelite empire, the northern ten tribes revolted upon his death and became in 922 BCE the independent nation of Israel distinct from the Davidic nation of Judah (including its royal city of Jerusalem). In 722, the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated by the Assyrians and absorbed into the Assyrian Empire; the ten northern tribes were taken into exile and disappeared, never to be identified again and never to return to the land. All that is Israel today has descended from the two remaining tribes that made up the southern kingdom of Judah.

The second reason why Israel was going to be annihilated, Amos prophesied, was because it had become such an idolatrous nation, giving lip service to Yahweh but in reality giving its allegiance to the Canaanite gods of money, power and prestige.² This accusation is more subtly stated than the first, but those who initially heard Amos' prophecy could not help but recognize it.

Amos wrote, "On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentations. I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, with the end of it like a bitter day" (vss. 9-10).

The northern kingdom of Israel engaged in star and sun worship (Amos 5:26; II Kings 23:5, 11) as part of their idolatry of the Canaanite gods, even though they continued to officially maintain the worship of Yahweh. The worship of the stars and sun occurred in national feasts of gluttony, sexual license and extravagant profligacy (II Kings 17:10; Exodus 32:1-35).

Amos is here referring to that star and sun worship, noting that such allegiance was strictly prohibited by the Mosaic Law (Deut. 4:19), that God was alone god and that the sun was merely his creation and not its own god (Gen. 1:16). Therefore, it would be God that would "make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight". It would be God who would "turn your feasts into mourning and your songs into lamentations". God would bring punishment on the nation's land, as well as upon its people – a reference to the plague of darkness that the Lord brought upon Egypt (Ex. 10:21; Ps. 105:28), a judgment that Israel would now receive as well, so that as Egypt was decimated, so will Israel be decimated. It will be God's actions that "will bring sackcloth on all loins and baldness on every head" – sackcloth being used in ancient times as a sign of mourning because the pleasures of life no longer mattered (Gen. 37:34; II Samuel 3:31), and "baldness" being a practice of bodily disfigurement through shaving one's head that would disgrace God's image in humanity (Is. 14:2-3; Ezek. 27:30, 31; Micah 1:16). And all this would happen because Israel had gone after other gods than Yahweh and had betrayed God's Law that required of the nation economic equity.

The result of such disobedience on the nation's part would result in the defeat and subsequent annihilation of that nation. But its fate would even be worse than that. "The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it" (vss. 11-12). Not only will the nation lose its national identity and its people disappear from the face of the earth. But the word of the Lord will disappear as well so that, no matter how people will frantically seek for that word, they will not find it. God will have removed himself from Israel, and none will know him any longer! This is the inevitable result of the nation and its people that becomes possessed by the lust for wealth, power and dominance – "a famine of hearing the words of the Lord"!

² Each of the Canaanite gods represented specific desired priorities of life – Asherah being the goddess of sex, Ba'al being the god of power and position, and Moloch the god of wealth.

Psalm 52 is essentially a comparison between those who ignore God, concentrating on their own benefit and those who are receptive and open toward God. The psalm divides into two parts. The first section (vss. 1-4) presents the person who is full of “boasts and mischief”, who is “plotting the destruction (of others)”, whose “tongue is like a sharp razor”, who “loves evil more than good”. That section continues (vss. 5-7) by pressing the issue further by examining what it is that causes people to appear to be spiritual and yet actually be full of abuse and perversion. The second section (verses 8-9) then deals with the opposite of the grasping and destructive person by looking at the one who places his/her trust in God and thus lives a grateful and truly productive life.

What is particularly noteworthy about the first section is its exploration of that which makes the destructive person destructive. The Psalmist writes, “See the one who would not take refuge in God, but trusted in abundant riches, and sought refuge in wealth” (vs. 7). He is one who dismisses refuge in God because he actually takes refuge in his money! It is money and the love of money that dominates such a man’s life, for both making and using it is his primary focus. In what the Psalmist writes here about wealth, he anticipates the profound insight of the Apostle Paul who wrote more than a thousand years later, “People who long to be rich are a prey to trial; they get trapped into all sorts of foolish and harmful ambitions which plunge people into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all evils, and there are some who, pursuing it, have wandered away from the faith and so given their souls any number of fatal wounds” (I Timothy 6:9-10, The New Jerusalem Bible).

What is particularly intriguing in this Psalm is that the Psalmist is not talking about a person who is an out-and-out heathen and exploiter of others. Rather, he is one who pretends to be dedicated to God but is, in reality, primarily dedicated to building and accumulating wealth and power! He is one who participates in the worship of God but is, in reality, worships power, wealth and control. In fact, he may not even be aware that his heart is centered elsewhere than in God, but it is because “the love of money is the root of all evils”!

In contrast, the truly Godly man is described differently. “I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever. I will thank you forever, because of what you have done. In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good” (vss. 8-9). The psalmist flourishes in the presence of God, much as does “a green olive tree” flourishes in fertile soil. He lives a life centered in trusting in God and God’s steadfast and unshakeable love. Therefore, he lives a life of gratitude for what has done for him, and thus by such an attitude and lifestyle, as well as his words, “I will proclaim your name, for it is good”.

This psalm says a great deal about what our attitudes and lifestyle should be. If we live our lives both trusting in God’s love for us and centered in gratitude for all God has done in and through us, then we will not be tempted to yield to becoming a competitive and grasping person – having a form of godliness but in reality, centered in those forces that bring us power, wealth and prestige!

Luke 10:38-42 is the well-known story of Mary and Martha hosting Jesus at dinner. Martha is incensed at her sister for sitting, listening to Jesus while Martha is preparing their meal together.

When Martha complains, Jesus replies, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her” (10:41-42).

This story is often used to divide between the contemplative and active life, admonishing the reader to not become fixated in “doing” at the expense of “being”. That, however, is to miss the whole point of Luke’s story. In fact, in the world of Luke’s time, it was unheard of for a woman to choose the role of a disciple, sitting at the Master’s feet to learn from him and thus, presumably, to become a leader of the church. So, if anything, this story is told to turn the world of appropriate gender roles “upside down”.

What this story is truly about is demonstrating that each follower of Jesus is called to a particular function that is not defined by social convention. Rather, because of our respective encounters with Jesus of Nazareth, we are each set free to discover and live into that mission or ministry that God has designed for us. But effective living into that vocation requires us to build a balance within ourselves of both contemplation and action. That is to choose the “better part”.

Mary was described in this passage as a true contemplative. Today, we would call her an introvert. She was quiet, thoughtful, meditative, the kind of person who would be very intuitive, who would carefully think through what she believed, who would dream great dreams. Her greatest delight would be to spend her time quietly listening to those more spiritually discerning and wise than she. The last thing Mary would choose to do would be that of being the center of attention.

Martha, on the other hand, was a true activist. Today, we would call her an extravert. She would be a no-nonsense, hard-working, task-oriented person, a woman who would move very quickly and spontaneously out of her feelings, who would laugh easily and cry easily and sympathize easily and get angry easily. Her greatest delight would be to savor every element of a meal with her friends. The last thing Martha would choose would be that of having an hour with absolutely nothing to do.

When Jesus said to Martha, “It is Mary who has chosen the better part,” he was not saying, “contemplation is better than action; quiet is more spiritual than hospitality.” What he was saying, in essence, was “Martha, you allow yourself to become too caught up in your natural functions of activism and production. If you are to become a fulfilled, whole person, you will need to discover your better part – the part Mary has already found – that of quiet and contemplation.”

If it had been Mary who would have complained that Martha was disturbing her contemplation by banging pots and pans together, I think Jesus probably would have said to her, “Mary, Mary, you become so caught up in ministering to your spirit that you forget how important the body is. If you are to become a whole person, you will need to learn what Martha has already found, that hard work and the enjoyment of a beautiful dinner with your friends is a little bit of heaven. Martha has chosen the better part”.

I believe that within each of us God has placed a deep desire to be a whole, balanced, fulfilled human being. The ordered person envies those who dance at life. The intuitive person wishes he could be more spontaneous. The introvert wishes she wasn't so shy. All of those reactions are actually God-given instincts to be a more balanced and integrated person. The envy we might feel toward another person is, in reality, the recognition that we need to discover in ourselves that quality we see personified in that envied person. The warmth we feel toward another may actually be our soul's hope to absorb from that person the spirit we find in him that so stands in contrast to our own.

Each of us long to be a whole, fulfilled human being. But because we aren't we unconsciously seek to create that wholeness by finding those unlike us. This truth is caught up in the old saying, "Opposites attract". The deep-seated compulsion God has placed within you to be a fully balanced, mature individual is often addressed by finding another or others whose personalities balance your own.

That was exactly what Mary and Martha had unwittingly done. Because both of them were so opposite in their personalities, they had gravitated toward each other in order to create a home that was both functional and balanced. But what had originally seemed an effective way to create a full life together had not worked out.

The trap Mary and Martha had fallen into was that they were preventing each other from choosing the better part. That prevention was not intentional; they had simply fallen into it through each of them exercising what they did best. Because Mary never took the time to prepare a meal for her guests, she wasn't discovering the joy of hospitality. And because Martha never allowed herself to take the time to sit at the feet of Jesus, she wasn't discovering the joy of contemplation.

The result was that both women were angry at each other, were seeking to manipulate each other into doing what the other wanted done, and consequently were missing the joy and potential blessing of a visit from Jesus. Neither was choosing the better part she needed. And that is exactly the problem with seeking to meet your inner need for wholeness and balance through another person. It simply can't be done.

St. Paul astutely wrote, "We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it" (Eph. 2:10, The Jerusalem Bible). It is not two or three or four people who make up God's work of art. Each one of us is created by God to be God's work of art, a complete, whole, thoroughly balanced and integrated individual. Each one of us is called by God to become the beautiful person God has created us to be. But how do we do that? How can we find wholeness and fulfillment in our own life?

St. Paul wrote, "You were dead, through the crimes and the sins in which you used to live. But God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy: when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ, and raised us up with him and gave us a place with him in heaven. For it is through grace that you have been saved" (Eph. 2:1, 4-6).

What each disciple of Jesus discovered at the Master's crucifixion and resurrection was that he or she could not make himself into a better, more balanced person. None of them, by their seeking and searching, could find fulfillment, whether they searched for that fulfillment in another person, by status or power or by their accumulation of things. Their wholeness could come only as a free gift from God. Their fatal flaw could be removed only by God. The development of their potentials and gifts wouldn't occur by committing themselves to a self-help program but by committing themselves to Christ. As Jesus had gone to his cross, so did each of his followers have to go to theirs – their respective crosses of wanting to be leader, wanting to be right, wanting to be sure, wanting to be great, wanting to be in control, wanting to be like the other person. Each of them had to be willing to say to God, "Here I am, Lord, just as I am – with all my potentials, with all my gifts, with all my expectations and hopes and dreams – and with all of my flaws and shortcomings. I turn them all over to you. Do with me as you will. Use me as you choose. I surrender my life to you!"

In Jesus' last recorded encounter with Mary and Martha, Martha is finally sitting at the Christ's feet. Jesus says to her, "Martha, I am the resurrection and the life. If anyone believes in me, even though he dies he will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26)

And Martha – the busy and bustling Martha, the newly reflective and rapt Martha, the now whole and balanced Martha answers, "Yes, Lord, I believe!"

Colossians 1:15-28 begins in earnest Paul's argument intended for the Colossian church. Given their unthinking adoption of the heretical teaching that, in order for them to be good Christians, they needed to embrace the worship of spirits, angelic beings and the "elemental spirits of the world" (2:8, 20), and thus disengage from public life into privatism, Paul is about to provide a corrective by presenting a biblical understanding of power. He begins that examination of power by starting with Jesus Christ. By arguing Christ's power, Paul hopes to demonstrate to the Colossians that they need to live out Christ's power in Corinth by working for the transformation of their city into a likeness of the kingdom of God. So he begins with Christ.

"(Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (1:15-20).

On the face of it, this passage seems to be a theological statement about the importance of Jesus Christ. But in reality, it is a very political statement.³ What Paul is arguing is the supremacy of

³ The most thorough study of Paul's theology of the "principalities and powers" in the New Testament, as well as the political understanding of the contemporary Roman and Israelite worlds, has been made by Walter Wink in his exhaustive trilogy, *The Powers*, all published by Fortress Press (*Naming the Powers*, 1984; *Unmasking the Powers*,

Jesus Christ. The Greek word particularly used by Paul in this passage to refer to Jesus is *arche* or “the one who holds the primary position of authority”. *Arche* can be used for a human authority (e.g., ruler of the synagogue, magistrate, judge, chief priest, governor), one holding the key position in a structure, or even the “spirituality” of the one holding pivotal authority in a system.

Jesus, Paul states in Colossians 1:15-20, is the *arche* of reality, the very first principle or essence of life (in the words of the Nicene Creed, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made”). As the *arche*, Paul is teaching here, Jesus is the creator of all things. And his creative work has included “all things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers”.

That formula of “thrones, dominions, rulers and powers” is political language. Since Jesus is the *arche* and has created all things on earth, he has therefore created all earthly “thrones” (the seat of a government), “dominions” (the territory of a government), “rulers” (the individuals who run each government) and “powers” (the vehicles of a government by which it enforces its will, like laws of the state and the military). Thus, Paul is developing the argument that Jesus is the creator of the Roman Empire and the Israelite nation, they are accountable to him, and he has determined their task of working for justice and mercy as an integral part of molding life into God’s intentions for it. Therefore, Jesus is the true Caesar, is head over the state, and is working “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth (political entities) or in heaven (angelic/demonic extensions of earthly entities), by making peace through the blood of his cross”.

Christ’s death, therefore, is the act by God that will bring about a reconciliation of all governments and states into one holy kingdom of God – the shalom community. And the work of the church is to be engaged in public life as Christ’s reconciling body, seeking by its intervention to bring about the conversion of the Caesars of this world to Christ (Col. 1:24-29; 2:8-15; Eph. 1:15-22; 2:11-22; 3:7-13).

But how is the church to go about exercising the power that Jesus has invested in it as the *arche* of all political, economic and religious systems of the world and of the world itself? It is to exercise Christ’s power by being a suffering servant, not by imitating the powers of control and domination of the world.

The next portion of today’s epistle lesson (Col. 1:21-28) begins with Paul’s reminder to the Colossian Christians that they were, at one time, “estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds”. But Jesus demonstrated his power toward them by both dying for them and calling them to die to the standards of Rome, thus embracing the standards of Christ and his Kingdom. Through his redemptive work on the cross, Jesus has made us “holy and blameless and irreproachable” before God. Such transforming work as we know that Christ has done in us is an indication of the power he has at his disposal to work for the transformation of Israel, Rome and the entire political, economic and spiritual systems of the world. That is why you Colossians

1986; and *Engaging the Powers*, 1992). His argument on the politicality of the “principalities and powers” was so cogently argued and so overwhelmingly documented that virtually no biblical scholar of today questions it.

who have been so redeemed need to keep “your eyes on the prize” – “securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel”.

But how do we set free that power to impact and transform the world politically, socially, economically and spiritually? We set free that power by imitating how Jesus used such power. We become a servant of Christ to the world – even when that entails suffering. And Paul is the prime example of such service.

“I became (the church’s) servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints” (vss. 25-26). God wanted to transform the Gentile world as well as the Jewish one, the Roman Empire as well as the Jewish Temple, pagan economics as well as the economics of the Mosaic Law. God has done that transformational work through Jesus Christ. But now it becomes our task, as the followers of Jesus, to “warn everyone and teach everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ”. And we do that, not by imitating pagan and Jewish political, economic and religious structures in their lust to dominate, oppress and control but by imitating Jesus in being a suffering servant in our engagement of the world and its systems. Therefore, Paul argues, imitate me as I act as a suffering servant, for that is the role you must play, as well.

The political message throughout the book of Colossians is not only that politics and religion *do* mix. They *must* mix if society is ever to experience itself as the shalom community. The indicator that the political arena of a society is following God’s intentions for it is that it is acting justly and mercifully. The church, as a mediating institution in society, is to be about the task of seeking to pressure its society’s political institutions to be truly just in their management of public life while being particularly compassionate toward those who could become powerless. In this way, the church contributes toward bringing each throne, dominion, ruler and power under the lordship of Christ and fulfilling that role that God intends it to fill.

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