

July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Amos 8:1-12 “Furious Love”

My formative years as a Christian happened during my late teens when I came to faith through a parachurch ministry called Youth for Christ. Two things you need to know about me: As long as I can remember, I knew there was something bigger than me – something unseen but conscious and always connecting me to everything. The Bible stories that I learned in kindergarten put a name to that consciousness, which is God. I just didn’t know how to connect the stories with what I felt. They were just stories with characters and a plot that *sometimes* made sense but not always. So I dropped out of the church scene, but I eventually came to faith through Campus Life, which is the high school-age branch of Youth for Christ. I came to faith because I was taught that God’s desire was to be in relationship with humans. I was thinking, “Wait, you mean like me?” Yes. So this God that I’ve always experienced as an unknown force wants to *know* me? Yes, and the flip side is also true – you should get to know God. Okay, how? Through Jesus who is the fullness of God. Awesome! I was all in. My Campus Life leader said, “Now it’s time to find a church.” And I’m so thankful for my parents who gave me the freedom to explore my faith. Thank you, mom! See, I didn’t feel obligated to go to any particular church. It was, “Go! Find your path!” However, I also want to be honest and make it clear that as a 17-year-old, my choice of churches usually involved a girl. And that’s the second thing you need to know about me. Just being honest.

One of the things that I discovered in my search is that there are multiple ways in which God is described in the scriptures. In the New Testament, Jesus was presented as the reflection of God's character and being. If you want to know how God feels and how God responds to us, just look at Jesus and his teachings. Jesus is concerned about healing, being merciful, caring for others – especially people in need – prioritizing relationship over ritual, equipping others to spread the good news that God wants to be reconciled with the world and that Jesus is the path to that reconciliation. Great! This is what brought me to faith in the first place.

But then there was the God of the Old Testament. It seemed like that version of God was constantly smiting and punishing people. The God of the New Testament seemed a lot “nicer” than the God of the Old Testament. But in college and seminary, my professors assured me that it was the same God, and the difference had more to do with how God's people perceived and interpreted God's motives and actions. The difference is that we get to see a clearer picture of God through Jesus. The people of the Old Testament didn't have that benefit. They just had these prophets who were relaying messages that they received from dreams and visions. So the notion that “The God of the Old Testament” was a God of wrath, and the “God of the New Testament” was a God of love is an incomplete understanding. Are you sure about that pastor? Because the text that you had Dave read this morning has “wrath” written all over it! Yes, I get that. But this is one

of those tough-to-swallow lectionary texts that I talked about last week. It shows up in the lectionary every 3 years, and when I did a word search to see if I've *ever* preached on it, I discovered that I had not, which means I was probably avoiding it. If you've never heard this scripture, that's on me not you. So here we are, for better or for worse. Let's see how we can unpack this.

Amos, as well as most of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC prophets had the task of warning Israel that they were in danger of collapsing and falling into the hands of their enemies. Even though he lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, Amos' assignment was to deliver a message of judgment to Israel and the surrounding nations, *including* Judah. What were they being judged for? Injustice, religious hypocrisy, and idolatry. He condemned the wealthy and powerful who oppressed the poor and neglected the needs of the vulnerable. Make sure you understand, God wasn't condemning the wealthy, he was condemning those who's wealth was built on oppressing others. He also warned against insincere religious rituals that were not accompanied by righteous living. He emphasized that true worship involved practicing justice and righteousness. He warned that God would punish Israel for its wickedness and ultimately send them into exile which I guess sounds fairly straightforward. But the *way* he delivered this message? That was the shocker.

Pastor Nathan Nettleton, who is the creator of the Laughing Bird Psalms that we often use in worship is an Australian

theologian who also has a laughing bird version of this text from Amos. Here's verses four and five -

*Listen to me, you who wipe your feet on those in need;  
you who destroy the poor for your own gain.  
You resent religious holidays  
because they interrupt your wheeling and dealing;  
you demand twenty-four hour, seven-day trading  
so that you can rip people off without ceasing.  
Your advertising is all deceit and delusion;  
you rig the odds and the interest rates.  
You lure the poor into crippling debt  
until you own them — body and soul —  
and then charge them again for owing you money.*

Here's a little aside for you. We Christians have this idea in our minds that the majority of the angry-sounding prophecies in the Old Testament have to do with personal sins that we hide in our hearts. And there are quite a few preachers out there who want you to believe this too. But here's the reality - Biblical passages dealing with the ethics of wealth and poverty outnumber those dealing with personal morality by a ratio of ten to one. And that's not me making up numbers to prove my point. Ten to one. Yes, God is angry in this passage. But that anger isn't directed at you because you smoke or chew or hang out with people who do. It's directed at the injustice of the leaders of these nations.

Uh oh. Here goes pastor Jesse playing the social injustice card again. No. Not this Sunday. See, I don't think injustice *is* God's biggest concern here. Bear with me because I don't think I'm arguing against Amos and the other prophets by saying this. There's something in the white-hot anger, in the impassioned fury of God's language here that seems to belong to a completely different agenda. There's a sense of loss of control, loss of reason; a sense of wild hot-headed rage that screams and threatens and sometimes does crazy things. It sounds irrational. Desperate. It's not the sort of temperament I associate with the great champions of justice like the Martin Luther King Jrs. or, Desmond TuTus or, the William Barbers of the world. They nearly always seem to be admirably dignified, measured and consistent. Most of the time.

Amos' message seems to be about severing communication. Early in the passage it's like God is saying, "That's it. It is all over between me and these people." And towards the end of the passage, God threatens to "send a famine on the land, not a famine of food and water, but a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord." This is a truly awful prospect when you consider that God's words are crucial to our life. Think about it - It is with a *word* that God speaks the universe into existence. It is not by bread alone that we live, but by every *word* that proceeds from the mouth of God. Jesus himself is introduced to us in John's gospel as the *Word* made flesh dwelling among us. Theologically speaking, a famine of hearing God's word would be living death. But I don't think

this is something that should be *theologically analyzed*. What this really sounds like, and what I think we're *supposed* to hear is the screaming rage of a betrayed lover saying, "I'll never speak to you again!"

Okay, our pastor has finally lost it. That's just weird Jesse. No, think about it -- This sounds like someone in a romantic relationship who blows up and uses the half-crazed, irrational, fiery and passionate language of one who has been betrayed by the one they love. This is the language of one who has chosen a beloved people, and who is so desperately and achingly in love with these people that whenever they fail to respond to God's love, or fail to return it, or outright tramples over it, there is an explosion of fury -- a fury full of anguish and passion and pain. Until *we know that love* and allow ourselves to be known by that love, I don't think we can really know what justice means to God.

Think about the Exodus story. On the surface it looks like God is taking a stand against injustice. God hears the cries of the people in slavery and comes to rescue them. *We* think it means that God's biggest concern is an ideological opposition to slavery. Sure. That's part of it. But if the person you love more than anyone else in the world was kidnapped, locked up, and forced into slavery, what would be motivating you to rescue your beloved? Would it be your ideological opposition to human trafficking? No! It would be love. You would go crazy at the thought of your beloved being abused and mistreated.

*This* is what justice means to God. It is what falls into place when love is given its full measure. True love does no injustice, because it couldn't bear to. God is not just seeking "liberty for the oppressed" God is exploding with wounded rage against the oppressors. But here in this passage from Amos, God's beloved hasn't been *kidnapped* by their oppressors. They've *given themselves to* the oppressor. What Amos is giving us is a taste of the white-hot fury of a love that's been betrayed yet burning still. And, as is usually the case with angry lovers, what this love most truly wants is not revenge or destruction, but reconciliation and forgiveness and a rekindling of that love. Yes, God always takes the side of the downtrodden, but God also longs for the redemption of the callous and the cruel. It's not an either/or, it's a both/and. So maybe the real message of Amos isn't just that injustice brings judgment—it's that divine judgment is the desperate cry of a God who refuses to stop loving us, even when we've stopped listening.