

Amos 8:1-12 “Fruit Basket Upset”

We're on week five of our series on Heroic Prophets of the Old Testament. We've spent our time thus far learning about some prophets who preached during a time where God's people were divided into two Kingdoms. There was the southern kingdom of Judah, who were more religiously observant, and then the northern kingdom of Israel, who were more secular. Both kingdoms had their issues, but it seemed like the prophets God called zeroed in on Israel more. Last week, we learned about Amos, a shepherd and tree trimmer who was called by God to deliver a message of judgment to King Jeroboam II. We spent a lot of time sort of picking on Jeroboam for all his faults as Israel's leader. But we need to be careful about that, because it's way too easy to blame everything on a nation's leader. Sure, God had issues with Jeroboam, and God's prophet Amos took time to address his sins, but he also had a lot to say about the people of Israel. Because, let's face it, just because a King is corrupt doesn't mean the nation gets a bye when it comes to being accountable for turning away from God in the first place.

Here's something you need to know about Amos that I failed to mention last week - He's nobody's favorite prophet. And I'm not talking about during the time he walked the earth either. I'm talking about today too. There's a commentary series called *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. It's been the standard for scholarly Bible commentaries for close to 25 years now. Most books in the Bible get their own chapters in this commentary, but in the New Interpreter's Commentary, it's "Hosea - Micah." Okay, but what about Joel and Amos? I don't know. Maybe it's because these prophets all seem so angry and abrasive. Not that other prophets in the Old Testament are all warm and cuddly, but Amos especially seems ... judgmental. And we in the church nowadays shy away from anything that seems overly-judgmental. But remember, that's what Amos was commissioned to do. He was supposed to deliver a message of judgment to both King Jeroboam II *and* the nation of Israel for being overly concerned with wealth and power while ignoring the needs of those who were being hurt by their

relentless pursuit of material comforts. You read this book, and you think, “That guy has some serious anger issues!” He even resorted to name calling. Back in chapter four, he called the women in the region of Samaria a bunch of “fat cows!” We read that today, and we think, “Did he just resort to body shaming women?!” You may be thinking, “You picked a heckuva person to include in your list of heroic prophets there Jesse!” As one commentator wrote, “If you like the prophet Amos, you’re probably not reading it right.”

This week’s passage doesn’t help much because it’s one of those classic “fire and brimstone” scriptures that people associate with doomsday prophets. You know how in movies and comic strips they automatically depict a “prophet” as someone wearing a gunny sack and carrying a sign that says, “The end is near?” We can thank prophets like Amos for that stereotype. So according to the passage that Joe read this morning, God starts a conversation with Amos, “What do you see?” Amos says, “I see a basket of ripe summer fruit.” Well, what does that have to do with anything? In the same way the fruit is ripe to eat, the time is ripe for God’s judgement. It’s time to upset that basket of fruit. Then God starts in with words of both support and judgement. The support is for those who are experiencing oppression and the judgement is on those who are the oppressors. If you bring ruin to the poor and needy, then guess what? You’re bringing ruin on yourselves. What sort of things are the people doing that God doesn’t like? 1.) They’re not honoring the Sabbath. They just want it to be over so they can go back to the business of making money. There’s no repentance or transformation going on, they just go through the motions. 2.) They’re cheating people by using different measures and rates to confuse people who don’t know they’re being cheated in the marketplace. 3.) They “buy the needy for silver, and the helpless for sandals.” In other words, a lot of poor folks are put in places where they become indebted to someone, and they end up having to work it off for little or nothing. We call that “slavery” today. This is why Jesus included the phrase, “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” in the Lord’s prayer. Debt slavery was a big way to take advantage of the poor back then. 4.) And finally, they sell garbage

as grain which keeps the poor undernourished and weak. So then God starts talking about a day of judgment for those who exploit others in these ways. There's no holding back either. "On that day, 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 to all your loins ... (which sounds ... uncomfortable) and ... get this ... I will bring baldness to every head. Again with the body shaming! Ouch.

This chapter is classified as a lament. A lament is a poem expressing mourning and sadness. As much as it may alienate some people who have a hard time getting past the "judgy" images, I think on other levels it connects with folks who are feeling anger or pain over seeing injustices in our communities and nationally. It resonates with people who are experiencing grief and who are being deceived. People who appreciate Amos' words might include those who live where those in power seem to be able to keep their power, but those who have need are disempowered and kept in their place.

I want to get back to who this is directed toward. Last week we spent a good amount of time beating up on King Jeroboam, which was appropriate, because that was the text we had in front of us at the time. But God also makes it clear that a majority of Jeroboam's subjects in Israel share responsibility for why the nation is no longer in God's favor and deserves judgment. Most of the time, when a despotic ruler comes to power, it's not just out of the blue. It's a slow process. If it does happen overnight (as sometimes it does), there's usually a lot more resistance and open rebellion. Most of the time, though, when a ruler like Jeroboam comes to power who seems to have forgotten their nation's core moral values, it's because there's been a steady moral decline for quite some time. It's like that terrible "frog in a kettle" illustration. If you throw a frog in boiling water, it will immediately jump out, but if you raise the temperature of the water slowly over time, the frog will cook. That's what was happening in Israel. Their corruption began long before Jeroboam came to power. You could even argue that Jeroboam

was a *byproduct* of Israel's decline because he certainly wasn't the *cause* of it. Do you hear what I'm saying? This has been true throughout history.

God's message as spoken through these heroic prophets during the 8th Century BC had a common theme. "Soon you're going to realize what's going on around you, you're going to wake up, and you're going to search for God, but you won't be able to find God." Now don't misinterpret this to say, "And God won't be there." It's, "You'll be so fearful and desperate, you won't even be able to even find God." Hard to find someone who you've ignored for so long that you fail to even recognize them.

Last week, I said that one of the reasons we're doing this series on heroic prophets is to ask, "What *makes* a heroic prophet?" and "Is God calling *me* to be a heroic prophet?" Some people dismiss the possibility that they could ever be a prophet. And part of the reason for this is that people misunderstand what prophecy is. People get "prophet" mixed up with "soothsayer" or "fortune teller." A soothsayer is someone who claims to be able to see the future. A prophet, on the other hand, is simply someone who delivers God's message to either an institution or a nation that's in danger of collapsing because of its sin. Catholic theologian Richard Rohr wrote, "Prophets are not fortune tellers. Because the prophet or prophetess speaks the truth in the largest context, after the fact, it definitely feels like they foretold something." But the core of a prophetic message is: "Be aware that what comes around goes around." Prophets teach how reality works by sharing what's going to happen if people keep going down the wrong path. A prophet may say something like, "If you keep burning through your material resources in such an irresponsible way, you're not going to survive when they run out!" That's not a threat, that's a description. Unfortunately, Christians often interpret prophesy as a threat to try to change behavior. More often than not, prophesy is really just showing us universal patterns that are always true. "If you don't find your moral compass, you're going to fall apart." "If you don't let God's agenda be a priority, your nation will

collapse.” “If you continue to bury your head in the sand and not address the injustices that are going on right in front of you, not only are you going to lose your way, you’re going to have a tough time even getting back on the right path.”

So what does this say to us today? Honestly, I don’t see a whole lot of difference between what Israel was being called out for then and what we need to be called out for now. We don’t seem to care much about the concept of Sabbath anymore. Sabbath is an act of faith that says, “Because we believe that there is enough resources for everyone, we can afford to set one day aside to be thankful for what God has given us.” Yet how many of us would freak out if Walmart or Target or Best Buy weren’t open seven days a week? It’s because we operate on an attitude of scarcity. Sabbath requires us to operate on an attitude of abundance. How often do predatory lending companies prey on the poor by providing them easy-access loans, but then charge excessive interest rates to bury the poor under a mountain of debt that they may never get out of? And where do these predatory lenders set up shop? In the poorest neighborhoods. Speaking of poor neighborhoods, how often and to whom do those in power “sell garbage as grain?” Someday go to the poor part of a major metropolitan area and take a look at the grocery store to fast food chain restaurant ratio. See what I’m saying?

People of God ... please ... keep your eyes and ears open as you study these prophets. They lived during a time when God’s people were theologically and ideologically divided and the citizens who bore the brunt of this division were the most vulnerable in both kingdoms. And again this week I ask you to listen to those prophetic voices past and present who proclaim the ethics of God’s reign and hold our nation accountable for it. Or ... or, if God is calling you, then *you be that voice*.