

“A Basket of Fruit from Amos”

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This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. ²He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the LORD said to me, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. ³The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,” says the Lord GOD; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”

⁴Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵saying, “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, ⁶buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” ⁷The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely, I will never forget any of their deeds. ⁸Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? ⁹On that day, says the Lord GOD, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. ¹⁰I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

¹¹The 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. ¹²They 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. (Amos 8:1-12)

I don't know about you, but I love a good fruit basket. Somehow the pears you get at Christmastime are perfectly sweet and tender. Apples in the fall are crisp and juicy. And a summer fruit basket holds some of the best prizes: plump strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and figs... cantaloupes and watermelons... summer tomatoes just right for a few slices of bread and some mayonnaise. It's all good to me.

So, it would seem that Amos' vision of a basket of summer fruit would be a wonderful blessing – a ready-to-eat picnic of delicious seasonal treats. But what if you didn't eat it for a while? What if you joyfully brought the fruit basket in off the porch, set it gratefully on a corner in the kitchen, and then promptly got distracted by other things? Two weeks pass, and you finally remember that great gift, but by that time, what had been sweet has turned sour. Something that would have been delicious if it had been used and enjoyed at the right time is now mushy and distasteful. It may even start to have that smell -- you know, that whiff you get when you walk into the kitchen and catch a faint odor of something slightly vinegary, and then you realize where it's coming from. This fruit basket Amos sees comes with an ominous warning – an omen of impending doom, punishment, wailings – even dead bodies in the streets.

As I see it, there are three things Israel was meant to learn, and that we are meant to learn today, from the mixed message of the summer fruit. The first relates to the **active injustice** that was being perpetrated in that land, even by people who were in the pews of the church. Amos saw people who acted the part of faithful people – they came to church, they put money in the offering plates, they prayed the prayers and read the scriptures. But



Amos got the feeling that their minds were really on other things. It was like they could not wait for the sabbath to end so that they could get back to the things that really interested them, and many of the things that really interested them were sinful and unjust. Interested primarily in profit, they were using faulty weights when selling their produce. They were making false promises in order to take advantage of others. They were actively profiting off of the most needy and marginalized people in their community. The book of Hebrews, as it praises the faith and conduct of Moses, says that the great prophet chose to avoid “the fleeting pleasures of sin.”¹ It is an acknowledgement of the truth that sinning can be a lot of fun. The immediate consequences of sin can be immensely pleasurable. But the pleasures of sin are indeed fleeting. Very soon after we sin, surprisingly soon, sin leaves us hollow, empty, disoriented, and sad.

There is a great scene in the movie “Gladiator” when the Emperor Commodus, who personifies evil and sin, is taunting the heroic gladiator in the Roman Coliseum. In that moment, Commodus holds all the cards and has all the power, and he takes advantage of that imbalance to jeer cruelly at the gladiator about the abuse and murder of his wife and son. It was enough to send any person into violent retaliation, which is exactly what the tyrant wanted. But Maximus bites his lip and controls his rage, and replies ominously, “The time for honoring yourself will soon be at an end.”²

This is the essence of Amos’ message to those who abuse their privilege. Those who take advantage of the weak might make a quick profit. Their sins might satisfy for a season. But that feeling will quickly turn and rot. The time for honoring themselves will soon be at an end, for, as Amos says, justice will soon roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

The second lesson involves another group of people, who were also in the congregation. These people were not actively oppressing anyone. They were not sinning in that way. But they did know what was going on. They saw the injustice being perpetrated. They knew the scales were rigged; they knew people were being hurt, but **they said nothing, and they did nothing**. They turned their eyes away, and pretended they did not see.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Nobel prize-winning cleric who helped to lead the church’s resistance to apartheid in South Africa, once wrote that “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”³ Amos was seeing that very problem in the nation of Israel. It was another way that the faith of God’s people might be looking fresh and attractive from the outside, but was rotting on the inside. Amos knew that there was a cost to staying silent in the face of injustice. He knew that an active faith, a faith that is vibrant and alive, is willing to stand up and be heard, willing to raise its voice in defense of those who are being oppressed or mistreated. Not only was their silence eroding their self-confidence and self-esteem from within, it was also corrupting the external witness they were offering to the downtrodden in the larger community. As Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said on behalf of those who were suffering under the oppressive injustice of Jim Crow, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

¹ Hebrews 11:25.

² “Gladiator.” Dir. Ridley Scott. Dreamworks and Universal Pictures, 2000.

³ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00016497>

The third and final lesson from the basket of summer fruit is for everyone... not just those who were actively perpetuating injustice, or those who were staying silent when they should have been speaking up, but for everyone who believes themselves to be a person of faith. Again and again in the scriptures, those who seek God are encouraged to bear good fruit. When we are trying to separate the good from the bad, the real from the fake, Jesus says, *"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes cannot be gathered from thorn bushes. Figs do not grow on prickly thistle plants."*⁴ The lesson is that we all need to be paying close attention to the kind of fruit we are producing in our spiritual lives, and that means we all need to be cultivating our faith. ***Faith takes work and attention.***

There is a lot we do not know about the prophet Amos, but we do know that he described himself as "a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees." Amos was a farmer and horticulturalist, and his specialty was the sycamore tree. In ancient Israel, that label "sycamore" did not refer to the massive trees we think of in America. The Hebrew word used here refers to a smaller tree that produces fruit much like a fig, only a fig is much tastier. Its fruit starts out hard and bitter, and without special care, it will stay hard and bitter even when ripe. But ancient tenders of these trees discovered that, if the fruit was bruised or stressed, it would quickly sweeten. This was one of Amos' jobs. When the time was right, he would take an iron comb and walk through the sycamore groves to scratch, bruise, and mar the skin of the sycamore fruit to encourage it to mature and turn into something useful and palatable.⁵

I think that, when it comes to our faith, we are all like that sycamore fruit. We all need a little tending along the way. We cannot just sit back and wait for our faith to sweeten and ripen. Without a little stress and strain, we will never ripen into the people God wants us to be. Way back in 1860, the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon put it this way:

*"We may grow in some things by prosperity; but true ripeness in grace can only be obtained in adversity. Our cares, our losses, our crosses, our depression of spirits, our temptations from without and from within — these are all ripening dispensations, they are making us ready for the time when our beloved Lord shall come and gather us into the basket, like apples of gold in baskets of silver."*⁶

This understanding may help us when we encounter those challenges that life gives to us, to see trials and tribulations as "ripening dispensations" that may ultimately help us move past bitterness, ripen us into more faithful disciples, and help us to bear the good fruit that we are encouraged to bear in God's name.

One of Amos' most dire warnings in the passage we read this morning was that a time of famine was about to come upon the house of Israel because they had failed to tend to their spiritual lives and invest themselves in faith. They had become distracted and focused on other things, and the vineyard of Israel's faith was beginning to get overgrown with weeds and thorns. Notably, the famine that was coming would be neither a lack of grain nor a physical drought. It would be a spiritual drought. Amos was saying that soon, just as they realized that they needed the life-giving wisdom and guidance of God, when they finally realized what they had neglected and turned back to it, they would not be able to hear it

⁴ Matthew 7:15-16.

⁵ C.H. Spurgeon, "A Basket of Summer Fruit," October 28th, 1860. <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0343.php>

⁶ *Id.*

anymore. You *“will wander from sea to sea, and from north to east,”* Amos said. *“[You] shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but [you] shall not find it.”*

Our lives of faith are like fruit trees, and if we do not care for them, if we neglect to prune them and water them and give them spiritual food, then at some point we will go to that little closet where we stashed our faith while we were busy doing everything else... and realize that the closet is empty.

A gift of a basket of summer fruit is a wonderful thing – full of beneficial, nutritious, and delicious food. But we abuse this gift when we ourselves perpetuate injustice for personal gain... we disrespect this gift when we turn a blind eye to things that are wrong... and we neglect this gift when we do not take our faith seriously and cultivate our spiritual health, in the same way that a committed gardener would tend to a summer garden that she hopes will bear much good fruit.

May we hear and heed the message that we are given through the prophet today, in the name of the Creator, the Savior, and the Spirit of God. ***Amen.***