

“Will this be the time we listen to the prophet?”

Amos 8:1-12

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This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit. [a] 2 He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.”[b] Then the Lord said to me,

“The end has come upon my people Israel;

I will never again pass them by.

3 The songs of the temple[d] shall become wailings in that day,”

says the Lord God;

“the dead bodies shall be many,

cast out in every place. Be silent!”

4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy,

and bring to ruin the poor of the land,

5 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,

6 buying the poor for silver

and the needy for a pair of sandals,

and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

7 The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:

Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.

8 Shall 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?

9 On that day, says the Lord God,

I will make the sun go down at noon,

and darken the earth in broad daylight.

10 I 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.

11 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.

12 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

One of our Bible professors at Seminary told a story. She was driving South toward Trenton one day and, as she neared her house, she saw an older boy beating on a younger boy on the sidewalk—broad daylight. And being the responsible, doctorate earning professor of the Bible she instinctively pulled over, leapt out of her car, and told the older boy to knock it off. As soon as the older boy paused and looked up the younger one took off running. Our professor asked the older boy something like “What would your mama think of you picking on that little boy.”

He glared at her and his response stuck with her: “It’s a free country.” And then he ran off too.

Amos is a prophet from Judah prophesying in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. When we ask people what prophecy is they usually say something like “an accurate prediction of the future.” Sometimes they might even say that they know a person who has “the gift” of prophecy—that they have true insights into the future.

Biblical prophecy, however, is rarely just a prediction of the future. It is much more frequently a word of warning to the present about the consequences of their current behavior. Most people here know people who have been on the road to ruin. Some of you have even been that person. A prophet is someone who tells people—or nations—on the road to ruin what they need to do to avoid the consequences. And those on the receiving end of prophecy love to hear it, right?

Nope.

The response to prophecy is more often the response of the bully our teacher remembered—“it’s a free country!” We misunderstand what biblical freedom is even more frequently than we misunderstand what biblical prophecy means.

When God freed the people of Israel from the house of Slavery in Egypt God wanted to lead them into the Promised Land where they would embrace their freedom. But as soon as the Israelites

entered into God freedom they also entered the wilderness. Freedom wasn't easy. In fact many of the Israelites were nostalgic about their slave days when they had leeks, melons, cucumbers, and meat to eat.

They didn't recall their enslavement or the murder of their children. This pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night God was not tangible enough so they melted down their jewelry and crafted a golden calf. God desired their freedom so much God gave the Torah maintain their freedom prefacing the Ten Commandments with "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the House of Slavery." And this law went beyond the letter of the Ten Commandments demanding that the freedom they had been given now extends to strangers, travelers, foreigners that they meet along the way and who join them. The Promised Land is theirs too.

And even when they got to the Promised Land they found that maintain freedom wasn't easy. God was faithful, raising prophets and judges to advance the freedom of the people. But it required work and constant vigilance. Wouldn't it be easier, many thought, if they had a king to rule over them and fight their battles for them—like other nations? So though they were warned that they would cry out to God one day because of their king.

And these are the days in which Amos finds himself. The priests and kings formed an elite class around his wealth—garnered from taxes and tithes of the people. And the people want to become a part of this group, to gain status so the whole culture becomes more interested in their freedom and that of their neighbor than getting a leg up on their neighbor. They make the dollar great and the pound small. The call to extend freedom and care to the neighbor gave way to the desire to be better than the neighbor.

The consequence of this rejection of God's desires and commands leads Amos to say "Shall not the land tremble on this account and everyone mourn who lives in it?"

The freedom that God desired for God's people was too hard. It required too much work. So in various ways it was abandoned for the more self-justifying understanding of freedom represented in the response of that young Bully: "It's a free country."

Biblical freedom is not simply freedom *from* constraints. It is freedom *for* the sake of the neighbor. No, at this point in my talk I could speak about the truth of Amos' prophecy in our day. It's not so different after all, is it? We lionize the wealthy and blame the poor and desperate for our problems. I could spend the next few minutes crying out about injustice and perhaps that is what I should do.

But I won't. I'm going to make an assumption. Maybe I shouldn't but I'm going to. I'm going to assume that everyone here understands that this a beautiful world but also profoundly broken. I am going to assume everyone here understands that the wholeness and freedom of the world is the mission of everyone who seeks to follow Jesus. I am going to assume that you understand the Holy Spirit has made your hands and feet into the very servant hands of Christ.

Assuming these things may be an error but I'm going to do it because I often hear the question from people who confront the injustice of the world "What can I do?" or "What can the church do?" about it.

People of good conscience can differ about immigration policy. Having reasoned debate about such things would be a welcome change to the verbal grenades being lobbed about. But when a nation separates children from their parents, cages them, and fails to care for them, people of good conscience—especially those of us who seek to follow Jesus—cannot disagree about whether such a response lives up to God's command to care for our neighbors and welcome strangers. But what can we do I hear? What can the church do?

The first thing we can do is embrace the freedom God gave the Israelites and continues to grant us in Christ. Such freedom does not give us the freedom to hurt our neighbors, or even our enemies. It is meant to free us to truly be there for our neighbors.

This freedom, the freedom proclaimed in scripture, makes our lives better. It does not make them easier. When the people of Israel were freed from slavery and were wandering in the wilderness they complained because the transition from slavery to freedom wasn't a transition from a life of bondage to a life of ease. Their lives were better in many ways but they didn't enter into lives of ease.

Who was exercising divine freedom in that story that I began this sermon with? The boy beating up the other boy or the teacher, who could have simply driven by, who stopped and ended the beat down?

Freedom in scripture certainly encompasses political freedom—not to be enslaved or oppressed—but it is also freedom for the sake of our neighbors. To maintain and retain the freedom of God we must extend it to others. Biblical freedom isn't simply freedom from oppression it is freedom for the neighbor. It means to maintain your freedom you cannot become an oppressor yourself. And the kings and priests of Amos' day gave great speeches about the prosperity of the land and the blessings of God even as they became oppressors.

So when we take note of the injustices of the world and struggle to know what to do about it we need to embrace the freedom given in Christ.

And that means to embrace our ability to act. To do things. Even when we feel small. Even when we feel we can't make a difference. Even when our internal dialogue asks us "who do you think you are?"

You are a beloved child of God imbued by the Holy Spirit with divine freedom to speak and act to love your neighbors, your enemies, and to work towards the world embodied in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

God has given us agency, the ability to act.

But we live in a big world and most things are relatively immune to the actions of individuals. To actually get things done we have to do things together. We have to build organizations and institutions and work through them.

And this is where people's enthusiasm about doing something about the problems in the world begins to fizzle out.

"I want to do something about the environment, or education, or healthcare or immigration and your answer is to join a committee?"

Well, yeah. Sort of.

You see much of the time we sit in the bleachers of life watching the action. We'll root for our teams. We'll buy tickets—maybe even a jersey or two. But we don't think of ourselves as eligible for the team roster. We aren't going to go down and enter the field of play—the arena—for God's sakes. Who do we think we are?

This arena is filled with all sorts of teams and institutions and organizations which we may value but are problematic in some way if we look at them very closely.

Any group, religious, or charitable institution, if it has been around longer than a decade has messed up in some way. And the shortcomings of our institutions often motivates us to stay in the stands. But this reticence to enter the arena is one of the reasons why so many institutions are in decay.

So what do we do about the failures we see in our world? We use our God-given freedom to descend from the stands and enter the arena.

Suit up.

Enter the fray.

Join a committee.

Don't just give away your agency to others. Use it yourself.

Back in 1910 Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris entitled "Citizenship in a Republic" which has been nicknamed the "man in the arena" speech.

In it

Roosevelt railed against cynics who looked down at men who were trying to make the world a better place. "The poorest way to face life is to face it with a sneer," he said. "A cynical habit of thought and speech, a readiness to criticize work which the critic himself never tries to perform, an intellectual aloofness which will not accept contact with life's realities—all these

are marks, not ... of superiority but of weakness." Then he delivered an inspirational and impassioned message that drew huge applause:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Now there are some criticisms I could level against Roosevelt. It's deeply informed by a worldview that discounted the agency of women, for instance. But I think it has some truth for us today and I don't want to be a "cold and timid soul."

Amos wants the people of Israel—and the leaders of its institutions—to live up to their high calling. The powerful in Israel had coopted the institutions of their society that were intended to serve the common good and turned them into institutions that served the interests of the powerful.

Now, I know that couldn't happen today, but do you see how it might?

So what can you do about the problems you see around you?

Enter the arena. Consciously, embracing the freedom you have in Christ.

Because, you know what? You are already agents in the world. You're already involved in the work of an imperfect institution that is seeking to be the body of Christ, the agent of God in this world. One way you are making difference is by being part of this community of faith—this institution.

You give thousands of volunteer hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to make this world a better place.

And this is not your only place in the arena,

You spend your lives in courtrooms, operating rooms, government agencies, as contractors, electricians, concrete finishers, teachers, day care workers and you can bring your God given freedom to serve your neighbor to every arena that you are a part of.

What can you do about the problems you see in the world? Join a committee, sure.

Turn the institutions that are meant for the common good into institutions that serve the common good. Don't avoid involvement. Join the fray. It won't be easy. But it will be freeing.