

Peter Wiley

Amos 8:1-12 (selected verses from NIV & NRSV) & Luke 10:38-42

Hudson

7-22-07

SCRIPTURE: (AMOS) *This is what the sovereign Lord showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. "What do you see, Amos?" he asked. "A basket of ripe fruit," I answered. Then the Lord said to me, "The time is ripe for my people of Israel; I will spare them no longer. In that day," declares the Sovereign Lord, "the songs of the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies – flung everywhere! Silence!" Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land saying, "When will the new moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath ended that we may market wheat?" – skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. The Lord has sworn with the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of your deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile of Egypt? 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 religious feasts into mourning, and all your singing into weeping . . . The day 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 a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. They will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.*

(LUKE) *Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord why do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "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 away from her."*

SERMON:

Did you hear what the prophet Amos said? He said there will be a famine.

Not a famine of bread and drink, but a famine of words.

Imagine that . . .

What's it like to lack words? To lack communication? To not be able to hear from someone? That ancient Roman poet (Sextus Propertius) who suggested that absence makes the heart grow fonder had it all wrong. Absence doesn't lead to fondness and deepening affection. Absence leads to sadness, depression, jealousy, anger and abandonment.

About a month ago I talked to an old friend whose daughter is in the military serving in Iraq. He says every time the phone rings he thinks he's having a heart attack. He says he lives in fear.

But that's not the type of absence Amos is talking about. He says the Lord will greet the people of Israel with an absence of words. Think of it. An absence of words is typically a manipulative, spiteful game played in the heat of dispute and hurt. The *silent treatment* doesn't lead to fondness. And it doesn't lead to healing. It stokes the fires of anger and separation. Think of it. Even silence between nations doesn't lead to solutions and healing. It almost always leads to an escalation of fear, suspicion – and a further separation between disparate peoples.

But silence is what the prophet Amos says the people of Israel will soon get from their God. This was back around the eighth century B.C. The people of Israel were living in a time of peace and prosperity. It was a time when a few people accumulated a huge amount of wealth. But this wealth came at the expense of the many. And according to Amos, the prosperous do all the right and proper things:

They wear the right clothes.

They follow the right rituals.

They say the right prayers.

They're the model of piety and cleanliness.

So what's a prophet got to complain about? They look right . . . but according to Amos, all the time they spend in the temple, is spent on:

scheming their next hostile takeover,

conniving new ways to gouge

dreaming up new tax shelters

finding ways to avoid communal participation in welfare of all.

(that's what scripture says . . .)

And what does Amos have to say about all this? He says they may well get really rich

. . . filling their barns with years worth of grain that will rot

Hoarding wells with enough water to quench the thirst of the masses

. . . that will go stagnant in the hands of the few.

And the result, says Amos, is a famine far worse than lack of bread and drink . . . a famine of God's word. They'll search all they want, but God won't be found. Did you hear how Amos described it? He said: *they will run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.*

What do you think? Do you think this is a punishment? Or do you think it's really more of a consequence? Is Amos really suggesting the silence is God's vengeance on a heartless people? Or could it be the silence is a natural outcome? Could it be (do you think) that the people's obsession with possessions and the stuff of life has blinded them and deafened their ears to God? That's (in fact) the main thing prophets in the Bible did: They were truth tellers. They didn't predict the future so much as they shared what would happen when the people separated themselves from what was real and true.

What does Amos say about his Israelite brothers and sisters? He says hollow worship and reverence consumed with proper etiquette and the exclusion of the impure doesn't lead to God. Amos says the only way to be led to God is to really seek to listen and hear God's word alive.

In his memoir titled, Father Joe, Tony Hendra describes it like this:

. . . owning things – something the world takes for granted, in fact the world insists is a right – has important spiritual consequences. Possessions, are an extension of the self. They become the walls of a prison. The more possessions, the less likely will be your release from the prison. Property (writes Hendra) . . . gets in the way of love and trust between (people). If (everything is owned by different people), community is just a collection individual prisons. (p. 120)

It's all that stuff . . . & all those possessions . . . & all that conniving for more that Amos was talking about. He said the things would become walls of a prison . . . walls so thick and dense that God's word couldn't be heard. They could seek out God's word. They could look for it to the ends of the earth. But all they'd find is a deafening silence.

Think about this morning's Gospel. Martha's got it right, doesn't she?

She does those *things* we're supposed to do . . . and Jesus never once says they don't matter. Because they really do matter. But becoming so consumed with fulfilling requirements . . . by worrying over appearances and expectations – Martha was the one who lost sight of what it was all about. And she never heard God. She erected walls shutting out the word of God.

What sort of walls do we create silencing God? In the early 1980's I spent much of a summer living in the basement of an elderly woman just outside D.C. . . . a woman who by the time I knew her was the senior member of her family. She had inherited generations worth of furniture and nick-nacks. The problem was . . . she found she couldn't part with any of it. She didn't share any of it with her family. She just kept cramming it into her little house in Alexandria, Virginia. She had so much of it that you had to walk sideways to get through each of the rooms. And so it was that she lived in the midst of her treasures that squeezed everything else out. Can you picture it?

- She traded her cousins for a Queen Anne chair
- Her sisters for a Victorian couch
- Her nieces and nephews for some Ming vases.

Her life became the stuff walled around her. And the stuff in turn silenced out the rest of the world.

There's an alternative. At least that's what Father Joe, Amos and the gospels all say.

Let go of some of the stuff . . . so the stuff no longer holds us.

Tear down those walls . . . so that the word we seek is no longer held out.