

*The End is Near?*

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Amos 8:1-12

**1**This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. **2**He 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. **3**The 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!" **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.

Black lives matter. All lives matter. Blue lives matter. Room For All. Don't ask don't tell. White Privilege. Affirmative Action. Pro-life. Pro Choice.

Did I make you squirm yet? Words can be powerful, polarizing, and complicated, can't they? To give you a personal example, when I was 19, I came home from college one weekend to visit with my aunt and uncle, who were then missionaries in the Ukraine and staying with my parents. My aunt asked me what I was majoring in and when I told her Theatre, she gasped a bit and responded with "But what if you have to swear on stage?" I admit to being a bit insulted by her response. In fact, my answer to her might have even included a swear word. In my mind, the art I was engaging in was so much bigger than a few cuss words I might have to confront in a script. Those words simply weren't that important to me. And I couldn't understand why anyone would get so bent out of shape

over a few words! But this was very important to my aunt. Words don't really matter. Do they?

My Facebook news feed is certainly filled with loaded words these days, perhaps yours is too. I enjoy the fact that I have so many friends with an abundance of differing views and backgrounds. I don't always agree with them, but many make me think, even if they make me uncomfortable. The response to the increasingly violent events around our world is especially telling. In particular, I have noticed dissatisfaction and irritation from my non-religious friends when those of us who are Christians respond to these events with statements like "praying for France" or "praying for peace" or "praying to end racism". These friends feel phrases like this are just empty words that we Christians hide behind. Making it appear that we care, when we are actually doing too little. They, too, feel words don't really matter. And do they? Do words matter that much anymore? Are we a society of all talk? Are we just noisy gongs and clashing cymbals?

In our scripture passages today, we also see some pretty complicated relationships between God's people and words. In Luke, Mary chooses to listen to Jesus' words instead of helping her distracted and bothered sister, Martha. In fact, Jesus praises Mary for choosing what is better in this particular situation; to actively step away from the chaos of busyness to listen to the words of Jesus.

And in Amos. Wow Amos! The prophet Amos uses some powerful imagery to describe God's righteous anger over how the people of Israel have taken God's abundant blessings only to use them to exploit the poorest and most marginalized among them. Through Amos, God demonstrates that God's anger is so profound that God is refusing to speak to Israel. Amos calls it a famine! What strong words! It appears Israel is so distorted by their greed that they can't even comprehend the good, just, and life-giving word of God. They must have their whole being set straight again, if they are to hear the goodness of God's word.

In these passages, we see that the word of God is both a gift and a responsibility. The word of God teaches us how to care for God's people and if we refuse to listen, God will stop speaking until we are righted enough to hear. In fact, I wonder if a lesson we can take from both Luke and Amos is that word and action cannot be separated. In Luke, we see a picture not of listening being better than doing, but of the need to possess the proper attitude and spirit in order to love others through our hospitality and actions. It isn't that Mary is better than Martha. It was that in this particular moment, it was necessary to step out of the chaos of busyness to listen to Jesus in order to know how to actively engage the needs of hospitality. Jesus corrects Martha's attitude, her distractedness, not her work. Anything less than understanding the source and motivation of our work is just a distraction rather than a true engagement of caring for others.

And in Amos, we see how crucial it is to be shaped by the priorities of God, to care for those who reside on the fringes. To live in the understanding that all blessings of God, especially those that are financial, cannot be disconnected from God's passion for the sick, the poor, and the lost. To either separate the gifts of God from those God loves or

worse yet to capitalize on the weakness of those whom God loves is to come face to face with the judgment of God; a judgment that begins with no longer being able to hear or understand the conviction of God's voice to us through our holy scriptures.

So what might this all mean for us today? You might have seen that I titled today's message "The End Is Near" and despite the sarcastic prompting of a few of my friends, I did not wear a sandwich board to scare you with a fire and brimstone message. However, as we look at all the brokenness around us, the hate, the fear, the poverty, the bloodshed, the evil. I can't help but think our world today isn't too far off from the same brokenness and evil we see in Amos. It feels like the end is near. So how do we even begin to right this ship?

The book of Ecclesiastes famously tells us in chapter 3 "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to keep silence, and a time to speak."

What time is it in our world today? Is it time to engage in the rhetoric of the world around us? Is it time to circle the horses with those who believe exactly the same as us and shut out those who don't? Is it the time again where the blessing of being able to hear from God has been suspended, just as Amos warned Israel? Like the politics that fill our media, do we try to convince others that they are wrong with polarizing and impassioned words? Do we see angry Facebook posts and simply reply with an article link with an opposing view? Do we hear people say "all lives matter" and angrily reply with a point by point dissertation on why their view is less Christlike and ours is more? I admit that I sometimes do!

But perhaps it is time for something else. Might this be a time of listening? A time to intentionally remove ourselves from the chaos and busyness of our world and sit at the feet of Jesus to listen? Not a listening or a praying that is an end to itself. But listening in such an expectant way to be readied to act in a way that is hospitable to those around us. Listening that hears the pain of our black community without presumption to have the solution to end racism from a place of privilege. Listening to the pain of those new to our Holland community who do not understand our culture so that we might better understand how to include them in our communal life. Listening to the pain of our enemies, be they personal, or those in a far off land, in order to right our relationships.

*Perhaps listening is the countercultural antidote for the illness of cheap talk.*

Listening that demonstrates humility that we don't know the answer that will solve everything, but that we are in relationship with a God who does.

I admit that I was angry about something this weekend. My friend from seminary, Jeremy, who gave me permission to share this with you today, had a horrible experience of abusive and hateful homophobia while on a flight to Grand Rapids this week. Sitting behind him on his flight, was a group of men who engaged in hate speech about gay men. Jeremy, who is gay, was first enraged and then horribly hurt and then fearful as he heard their discussion escalate. So much so that he didn't feel safe enough to engage their

behavior. I was outraged by this story and discussed it online with my social media community. I fantasized about seeing these men and letting them have it in any way I could dream up. And let me tell you, I am a creative woman.

But. My friend Beck, a communications researcher, checked me. She has specifically researched and has taught “compassionate communication”, a form of non-violent communication. Beck said “It takes courage to empathize with these men, to turn to them, and seek to listen and understand what emotions and needs of theirs are present that would tell them it was both appropriate and warranted to behave this way. How many of us could turn to them and be curious without judgment? Because until they feel like their needs aren't being threatened, the needle won't move toward understanding.”

I was so...irritated to hear this! I wanted to find these men and hurt them like they hurt my friend. She was telling me to do the opposite! Beck's instructions felt so uncomfortable, it felt unjust. It felt unfulfilling. It felt so...Christian.

I think in this day and age, this is a way to love our neighbors. AND our enemies. This is how we can be both Mary and Martha. To take a moment to listen to God and listen to our neighbor. And then ready ourselves to be a part of the holy and life-giving empathetic hospitality that demonstrates the unity and care of the kingdom of God. It is not the easy path; but Jesus never promised us it would be easy. But This is how it feels and looks to be a Christian.