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A Famine of Hearing (Amos 8. 1-12)

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What does the prophet's voice add to the social, political, spiritual life of a people? What does the work of prophecy make possible?

Last week at Benedictus, we embarked on a little exploration of biblical prophecy and the significance of the prophetic vocation. So far, we've noted two elements particularly. First, the prophet proclaims the word of the Lord. In biblical understanding, true prophets are neither self-proclaimed nor self-proclaiming. They're called by God, often against their will and inclination, to communicate *God's* word, to voice *God's* will. It's not about the prophet's own judgements, opinions or warm suggestions for social improvement. Authentically prophetic speech arises from hearing, from listening beyond the self.

Second, the key purpose of this divine utterance is to remind God's people that they're answerable for their life; they're accountable for their way of being. And this gives rise to the characteristic shape of prophetic speech which involves indictment of wrong-doing and pronouncement of God's displeasure and judgement, followed by the call to change the heart and God's promise of renewal and hope for the penitent. Of course, how they *should* be living isn't news to God's people. 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good', says the prophet Micah. It's just that they seem to keep forgetting. The prophet's often unpopular role is to renew the community's sense of answerability. As Micah goes on: 'and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6.8).

Well, as for Micah so with the prophet Amos, active in the mid-8th century BCE. Amos has been called to speak for God in the midst of the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel, which was matched by the equally prosperous reign of Uzziah in the southern kingdom of Judah. According to Walter Brueggemann, in prophetic perspective, it was clear that the 'immense prosperity enjoyed in both kingdoms' at this time, 'was based on a disastrous practice of the rich against the poor that was sure to be unsustainable'.[1] The 'haves' in this society probably assume their unjustly acquired riches are forever. But Amos knows differently. His vision of the basket of summer fruit signifies that they're actually on the cusp of a change of season: 'The end has come upon my people Israel', says Amos on behalf of the Lord. And in Hebrew there's a sound-play on the key words: 'summer fruit' (*qayis*) and 'end' (*qes*) that clarifies the meaning of his vision.[2]

As we'd expect, Amos goes on to address directly those whose greed and exploitation is driving the Lord to enact judgement. 'Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land' (Amos 8.4). The prophet was apparently confronting a relatively new economic situation in Israel. In the older peasant society, families and clans owned their own land and were more autonomous. But 'the rise of urban culture under the monarchy led to the development of commerce and an economic upper class'.[3] According to scholar James Mays, those who had come to monopolise the grain markets continued to practice their religion, observing the holy days, 'but underneath their piety was a restless impatience'.

In the passage we heard, Amos imagines them complaining: 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale?' (Amos 8.5). He sees them scheming to defraud their customers. 'We will make the ephah small, and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances'. The *ephah* was a vessel by which a standard portion of grain was measured, while the *shekel* was Israel's basic unit of weight put in the scales to establish by balance how much silver a buyer owed. In other words, 'In selling grain to the poor these cunning merchants used a small [vessel] to measure what they

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), p.224.
[2] James L. Mays, *Amos* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1969), p.141.
[3] Mays, *Amos*, p.143.

gave, and a heavy weight to determine what they got'.[4] It's like an early Israelite version of price-gouging.

The Lord, according to Amos, is furious with this exploitation. 'Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on their account?' (Amos 8. 7-8). And there follow two oracles of judgement. The first seems like something we've heard before. '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 bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head' and so on and so forth. Calamity is coming and mourning, represented by the shaving of heads. And indeed, historically speaking, disaster does befall the northern kingdom of Israel around this time. It was conquered by the Assyrian empire in 721 BCE. In the prophetic imagination, this defeat is interpreted theologically. Rather than signalling a lack of power or sovereignty on the part of Israel's God, the prophet proclaims that it shows the reverse. God is here at work through the life of the world, through the nations, chastising and purifying the chosen people: 'On that day, says the Lord God, … ***I*** will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation' (Amos 8.9-10). And paradoxically, though this day is 'bitter', there remain grounds for hope – for despite the calamity, in the calamity, God is engaged with God's people. God still cares enough to seek to wake them up, to turn them from destructive ways.

But this makes Amos's second oracle of judgement more troubling. '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' (Amos 8.11). What seems suggested is not so much that God will stop speaking, or that God's word will cease, but that there will no longer be those who can hear and communicate that word. May speaks of 'the failure of prophetic vision',[5] which means that Israel will no longer be reminded of who they really are and are called to be.

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[4] Mays, *Amos*, p.144.
[5] Mays, *Amos*, p.149.

Given that the 'word of the Lord', as conveyed in the text of Amos, has not been exactly flattering or encouraging, you might think (if you were Israel) that this is no great loss. Who wants to hear a word that's exposing, that calls to account, that sees through your self-deception and self-destruction? Bring on the famine of hearing, a recalcitrant people might say. But in the end, is that really what they want? 'They shall wander from sea to sea', says the Lord according to Amos, from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean, 'and from north to east' making a complete circuit of their territory; 'they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it' (Amos 8.12). May writes: 'The picture is that of people fluttering against the limits of their spatial cage in vain hope of transcending the prison of their situation by finding the opening to the divine'.[6] It's true that when you hear the Word of God it may not immediately speak comfort; it may not tell you what you think you want to hear. But not to hear it at all … that's incalculably worse. It's like being simultaneously unmoored and yet trapped in futility, without access to the truth of your life. And I wonder what that image suggests in our culture, and for each of us?

What then is involved in hearing the word of the Lord? It seems to me it has to do with the willingness to listen – and thus with our capacity for silence. And it has to do with the capacity of language, symbol and image actually to bear that word. Barbara Brown Taylor, reflecting on this theme in her wonderful little book, *When God Is Silent*, has pointed to a crisis of language in our culture, where words have been commodified to manipulate and proliferated so as to bombard without meaning. Speaking of the famine of hearing that afflicts our time, she paraphrases Amos: 'Their prophets shall die and not be replaced. Their leaders shall speak words of promise but no power and their merchants shall fill the air with babble. Their temples shall be full of the sound of their own voices'.[7]

[6] Mays, *Amos*, p.149.
[7] Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), p.27.

We are exploring the prophetic vocation. The vocation both to hear the word of the Lord and awaken hearing in others. How do we discern this Word amidst all the others? And how do we speak it, share it, renew our listening and our language, such that this word may act in the world to communicate God? These are our themes for next week.