

A FAMINE OF HEARING

Amos 8:11-14

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 17, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

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. 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. In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst. Those who swear by Ashimah of Samaria, and say, "As your god lives, O Dan," and, "As the way of Beer-sheba lives"— they shall fall, and never rise again.

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This past week I spent some time on Capitol Hill at a reception and luncheon that brought together about 75 young adults from all over the country.

- Some were undergraduates; some, graduate students; and some, young professional working in the corporate or foundation world.
- They have all been involved in a year-long program helping them learn principles of non-violence and peaceful dialogue as modeled by the late Representative John Lewis and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- The program is sponsored by the Faith and Politics Institute, in which I have been active for many years.
- The Institute designed this program following Representative Lewis' death as a way to continue his work in the nation's capital for generations to come.

The ceremony also honored retiring Representative Fred Upton and Amey Upton, members of our congregation, who have long been involved in the Faith and Politics organization.

This was the first time I have been back in the Capitol since COVID, and therefore since January 6th as well. Even on one of the most humid days of the year, it was poignant to walk from Union Station to the Capitol and hear the stone and marble almost whisper: "We are still here. We are still standing. Come on in."

I.

Listening the fiery words of Amos the Prophet, the citizens of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) would not have detected such reassuring whispers. Speaking during the eighth century BCE, Amos was delivering a word of condemnation and doom concerning the future of Israel. Though he was an outsider, having been called to be a prophet while herding sheep and dressing sycamore trees in his native and poorer Southern Kingdom (Judah), Amos did not mince words in bringing down the consternation and critique and condemnation of God on the leaders of Israel for the way they treated the poor and oppressed.

Amos says:

*Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
And bring to ruin the poor of the land...*

He then mocks what he thinks the leaders of Israel are saying to themselves:

*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 practise deceit with false balances,
Buying the poor for silver
And the needy for a pair of sandals,
And selling the sweepings of the wheat.'*

Amos then speaks for God:

*Surely I will never forget any of their deeds...
I will make the sun go down at noon,
And darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning,
And all your songs into lamentation...*

Amos believes that the people of Northern Kingdom to whom he is addressing his words are prosperous enough to be spared the worry of going hungry or thirsty. He knows that no matter what the market does, no how high inflation rises and how long it lasts, the people he is addressing will have enough to survive. *Their* existence is not threatened by the price of gas and groceries.

II.

But Amos also knows that their ability to hear the Word and will of God can be blocked by their prosperity, their greed, their shady business practices, their quest for more, more, more. And Amos knows the corruption of their worship that follows on all these and leads to a *different* kind of famine:

*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.*

The inability to *find* God even when *seeking* God's presence is particularly poignant, Amos believes, among the young adults of Israel:

*In that day the beautiful young women and the young men
Shall faint for thirst...
They shall fall, and never rise again.*

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The longer I have been preaching in congregations like ours, which is similar to the congregations of my childhood and youth, the more I have come to realize that most of us view our religious faith as a private and personal matter.

- Some of us have been brought up in homes in which faith was positive; and at some point, we claimed it as our own and began to put our own stamp on it.
- Some of us have had negative memories of faith with which we have had to come to terms; but we have come to terms, and we are here, in person, online, listening, podcast, reading.
- Some of us were brought up in homes with little exposure to faith; while many, if not all of us, have spent some years putting faith on hold, perhaps coming back to it once we have had our own family or children.

But what Amos is describing is people who – like many *of* us and probably *more* around us – have become so wrapped up in the *material* world that even when we begin to seek something deeper and more meaningful than work and wealth, we cannot seem to *find* it.

The famine we face is not a famine of bread: we have various recipes and ingredients and palates. It is not a famine of water: we can order any water bottled and shipped from anywhere any time – even with supply chain issues. The famine we are facing is what Amos calls *a famine of the Word of God*: a famine of finding any *traces* of the divine – any *traces* of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit – in the lived reality of our *present* world, in the *lived* reality of our *interminable quest for more*.

*They shall wander from sea to sea...
Seeking the word of the Lord,
But they shall not find it.*

III.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is one of several novels often cited as "The Great American Novel." Every eight or ten years, I return to reading this book, if for no other reason than the giftedness of Fitzgerald's writing. But in his brief and alcohol dominated life, Fitzgerald had a touch of Amos-like wisdom, Amos-like prophecy.

Jay Gatsby is a mysterious stranger who comes to Long Island in the 1920s. He rents the largest house in the neighborhood and throws the most lavish parties – in search not only of the American Dream but also in an attempt to woo the beautiful but elusive Daisy Buchanan away from her abusive husband Tom.

But Gatsby's dream eludes him and implodes in the atmosphere of mob involvement, shady business practices, alcohol, addiction, adultery and finally in a murder-suicide that ends his dream and life. After Gatsby's death, the novel's narrator Nick Carraway surveys the now deserted property in which Gatsby had thrown his lavish parties and sought his dream life:

I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock [Nick says]. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Nick continues:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—

Nick concludes:

*So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*¹

It was Fitzgerald's brilliance to expose how *deeply ingrained* our desire for riches and success runs in this beloved country of ours: "...tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther....And one fine morning--"

But Fitzgerald knew that in reality, the dream for more often smothers our initial *capacity for wonder* which lies at the heart of our search for God and our search for ourselves in God.

*...Not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water,
But a famine of standing in awe and wonder
Before the words of the Lord.*

IV.

As I indicated last week, when we come to the closing chapter of the Book of Amos, the Book places Amos' shrill critique in the context of a word of *promise*: an unrelenting commitment on the part of God to the people of *all* nations God has created and to people of Israel God has called out of slavery in Egypt.²

The last verse of the book attributes God speaking directly:

*I will plant them on their soil,
And they shall no more be uprooted from their soil
That I have given them,
Said the Lord your God.*

The Hebrew word rendered as "soil" is *adamah*. It is the "dust of the ground" in Genesis 2 from which the original human being *adam* was created.³ *Adam* from *Adamah*. The *human being* from the *soil* of the earth.⁴

To people lost in materialism, this promise speaks to the *essence* of who we are as human beings: "earth," "soil" – that from which we *come*, that *from Whom* we come, that *in Whom* we live and move and have our being. Nothing is more basic to who we are than our rootedness in the God who created us. This promise of rootedness in in God's creation – in the simplicity of God's good earth – *never* leaves us, no matter what *we* do to *crowd* God out or *cast* God aside. The promise of who we are in God is there for the *taking*, a different kind of "*taking*" than that in which we normally engage.

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925).

² See 9:7. "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" This is apparently the only place in the prophetic literature where God asserts deliverance for people beyond the people of Israel.

³ Genesis 2:7.

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary Volume 2 Prophets* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 1280n15.

IV.

In addition to hearing the marble of the Capitol almost whisper its soothing words this week, I heard a live human being, a fellow Board Member at Faith and Politics, speak to the 75 young adults about what it is like to live and work in public service in Washington, DC. The speaker, Cheryl Johnson, has lived and worked in this city since coming to the Howard University Law School forty years ago. She now serves as Clerk of the House of Representatives.

She simply shared her experiences with the aspiring public servants who had been selected for the program, perhaps not unlike the beautiful young women and young men about whom Amos spoke. Her stories were funny, poignant, inspiring, and wise.

When I got back to my office, I wrote her an email:

...being back on the Hill, meeting some of the [young adults], watching the way you had them "eating out of your hand," and seeing their intense and hopeful interest in public service, in hard work, and in the pragmatism and patience it involves was uplifting for me, and renewing of my hope (however limited!) for the future.

Says Amos:

*I will plant them on their soil,
And they shall no more be uprooted from their soil
That I have given them,
Said the Lord your God.*

Amen.

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