

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“But, Wait a Minute, Lord”
By Eric Howell
Amos 8:1-12
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“What do you see?”

“A basket of ripe summer fruit.”

Is there anything more wonderful to lay eyes on than a full colorful basket of summer’s fruit so juicy that if it waits one more day it will be too late? It must be eaten tonight, and because there is so much of it, it must be shared with friends and neighbors who are all called to come and enjoy the bounty. “Come over friend. Taste and see the Lord is good. My basket runneth over. Help me enjoy this work of my hands and the work of God’s creation. Bite a tomato, slice a cucumber, fry the squash, shell a pea, peel a potato, feel the burn of a pepper on your tongue.” A basket of summer’s fruit evokes some of the most wonderful images. But that’s not exactly the message from God in Amos.

The book of Amos is a thundering account of God’s anger at injustice and mistreatment of vulnerable people by powerful people. Through Amos, who insists he wasn’t a professional mouthpiece for God but just a simple shepherd to whom God spoke, God warns Israel about the judgment that is coming. Amos isn’t alone in his warnings or his prophecies. All through scripture, God calls God’s people to live with not only compassion, but justice; not only mercy, but righteousness. It is a high calling, and people like you and me have fallen short of it. In Amos and in other scriptures, it goes something like this.

“What do you see?”

“A basket of ripe summer fruit.”

“Do you know what I see?”

“What, Lord?”

“I see the last basket of summer fruit you people are going to enjoy in your arrogance. This is it. Something has to change.”

“You see how ripe that fruit is?”

“Yes. It’s so ripe, it can’t wait another day.”

“Yes.”

“That’s how ripe and ready you are for My judgment. It can’t wait another day. This is it. After this fruit comes a famine. After the noise of the celebrations will come silence. After this celebration of life will come death.

There will be a thirst; not just for water. There will be a famine; not just of food. There will be a famine of My Word. You'll look for it everywhere, but you will not find it. Your basket, once so full, will be empty.

You have not been just. You have cheated, using false bottoms in your baskets of grain, scooping up the chaff that I told you to leave for the poor, and selling it to the poor for an inflated price. You use false weights to measure payments. You used your power to your own advantage and have taken advantage of the poor and powerless. I have watched you do this for too long and have warned you too many times.”

“Well, wait just a minute, Lord. We’ve been good religious people. Did we not sing well Lord? Isn’t that what you wanted?” (Amos 5:21-24)

“Oh, you sang your hearts out, some of you sang without even mumbling through the words. You played and burned incense and had special feast days. You did what you call worship with full pomp. But that wasn’t the point at all. You missed the point of it all. Worship is supposed to change you. It’s not just a show you produce; neither is it just an hour of the week you have to endure while your mind is racing to whatever it is that you do when you get out of here, to whatever you do for yourself. This is the deep stuff. Worship is supposed to be what is the truest part of you and the truest part of you all together. That’s why you do it together. The act of coming together in worship is a return to who you are: you are people whose relationship with one another and your relationship with Me are intertwined. But you missed the point, and your worship became nothing about Me, and nothing about one another; and in the end, nothing about you. Now it’s nothing to you. I can tell by how you treat one another when you get up and go out to your jobs. I can see that worship means nothing to you. Your insatiable greed makes it impossible for you to rest on the Sabbath and rejoice on the holidays (Satterlee). Now your empty worship means nothing to you or Me. Your songs are noise to Me. Your incense stinks in My nostrils. I hate, I despise your feasts; I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away your songs. Take away your harps. I will not listen to them; but let justice roll like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

“Now, wait a minute, God. Did we not bring sacrifices to You? Did we not give You some of what we had? What more do You want from us?”

“Do you think I want your sacrifices? Do you think that’s pleasing to Me? Those are more for you than for Me. When your hearts aren’t right with Me, do you think that it matters what you supposedly give to Me? It doesn’t matter whatever it is, whether it is the busy-body preparations of a Martha while I’m sitting right there waiting to go deep in relationship, or calves a year old, thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, or your first born babies in dedication to Me? You turn your work for Me into a self-justification, thinking that somehow it proves your righteousness. It doesn’t prove anything. When your good works are untethered from a deep, abiding faith, that’s what I call just being busy. And your good works become empty shells of self-interested busyness. I’ve seen churches do it all the time. Give Me Mary’s patient, listening spirit, and then live out of that place. Give Me the faith of your children. In fact, be like those children you bring to Me. Learn from them. They will teach you. You have a lot to learn from them. Be like a child to enter the kingdom of God. I’ve told you what is good. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

“Wait just a minute, God. Is not the day of the Lord coming, a day when You will show that we are the beloved people, the chosen ones? We will wait for that day to come when God will make us right.” (Amos 5:18)

“The day of the Lord? The day of the Lord? That’s all I hear from you, how you are so sure that the day of the Lord is good news for you. It’s not going to be good news for all of you. Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord. Why would you have the day of the Lord? It’s going to be a day of darkness, not of light, that you can’t escape, like you ran away from a lion only to run into a bear, then slipped into a house thinking you were safe, leaned against a wall and got bit by a snake. I’m holding a plumb line in My hand and measuring you. You are not upright. You are crooked. Do not look eagerly to the coming of the foreman when you are a crooked wall. Repent. Change your ways and live as I have called you to live today. This faith isn’t just about being rescued or raptured from this world. It’s about living as My children in My world and for this world.”

“Wait a minute, God. What about everyone else? We are better than they are. We are Your people. Doesn’t that count for anything?” (Amos 1-2)

“Of course, it counts for everything. That’s the point. I’ve got plenty to say against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, and Moab. No one is righteous, not even one. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But you knew better. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery in Egypt. I am the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I am the One who delivered you by Moses. I am the One who set David on his throne. I established this community to be a light to the world. You give off more shadow than light.

I send you to have compassion and you walk by the one on the side of the road who is beaten and robbed.

I send you to do justice and you become the robbers who use false weights; sell the gristle and call it filet mignon; sell the charity and then imprison the poor. The road to Jericho is dangerous enough as it is without you hiding behind every stone waiting to pounce.

I send you to be people of worship, to walk with your God, and you turn that into elaborate productions, but you don’t take it in. It doesn’t get in your bones, in your soul. This we agree on. We both hate your worship and your feasts. I hate it because it’s not true. You hate it because you are so impatient to get back and steal again. I want your true worship to have no end. (Amos 8:6) You want the worship just to be over.

And because of that, you didn’t get it. You are My chosen people. But you were not chosen FROM the other people. You were chosen FOR the other people. Being chosen people is always about being people on My mission to redeem and save the world, to be salt and light, to be a people set on a hill. If the Gospel isn’t Good News for everybody, it’s not Good News for anybody. By your relationship with Me, you were to be the example, the invitation, the open-armed people who incarnated My love for one another and for others, even enemies, even those who persecuted you and uttered all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account. (Matt 5:11) You were to rejoice and be glad, knowing your reward was with Me.”

“Now, wait just a minute, God. We have something to say. We have defended You against people who insult You. We built You a house, and even a

little room to stay in. You know, ‘The Lord is in His Holy Temple’ and all. (Habakkuk 2:20) We’ve done plenty, and in return we expect a blessing; even a thank you would be nice for all we’ve done for You. In fact, Lord, if I may say, You are lucky to have us. Think of where You’d be if You didn’t have us.”

“My child, you don’t remember the last part of that verse, do you? ‘The Lord is in His Holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence.’ You should probably remember that. Yes, I am soooo fortunate to have you as My people. You have done Me sooo proud. So proud, that a peacemaker named Ghandi said, ‘I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.’ (Ghandi) And another one, one of you who was after My own heart said, ‘When I fed the poor, they called me a saint. When I asked why are the poor hungry, they called me a communist.’ (Dom Helder Camara, archbishop of São Paulo).

I let you build Me a Temple once because you needed something tangible to see and touch and enter. You needed a place to identify with Me. (1 Kings 5) That’s why I gave you a king too. You needed someone to look to when you couldn’t see Me. (1 Samuel 8) But I have always been your King, and you, you together, My people, were always to be My Temple. I was to live among you and within you. You pushed Me out, farther and farther to the margins of your lives. Then you gave Me a special place, and special days, and special ceremonies. That’s fine. But what I wanted most of all, more than anything, in everything, I wanted you. That’s all I wanted. I wanted you to be My people. And I would be your God. It’s relationship I wanted, a deep abiding relationship, and from that deep place that I created within you, you would live out of it with one another.

You have traded this grace over and over again for a bowl of emptiness.”

“Now, wait just a minute, Lord.”

“NO! The time is ripe. Something must be done. Something must change. Everything must change to reorder your lives, and reorder our relationship, and reorder your relationships. There will be a new creation. You are incapable of it on your own. Without Me acting now, you will go on the way you have been going, and the most vulnerable among you are the ones carrying the weight of your sin.

I cannot wait another day, or another hour, or another minute for them, or for you. There will be no more waiting. You have severed your relationship with Me and abused your relationships with one another. You don’t even see how complicit you are with the way the world is that creates such injustice and pain. There is only one thing left to do, and it will be hard on you. Your feasts will turn to mourning and all your songs to lamentation. You will wear the sackcloth of mourning; it will be like the mourning for the loss of an only son. Of an Only Son.

The days are coming when there will be silence on the earth, a famine on the earth, not just a famine of bread or thirst for water, but of the Word of God. You will look for Me from north to south and not find Me. You will search for Me but I will not be here to be found by you where you are looking.

My children, I will leave you but I will not abandon you.

I will take all the injustice of the world on Myself, and all the pain. I will take the shame of My people on My own shoulders. I will take your sin on Me. I will go alone that you may come together. I will bow to the principalities of this world, so that you may submit to My power that is not of this world. I will show you what the world has become so that you may never forget what is at stake when I call you to be in the world but not of the world. I will go to death, that you may have Life.

There will be evil in the world, but it will not be the last word. There will be pain in the world, but it will not be the last word. There will be silence in the world, but even it will not mean the last word. My word, a word of judgment and mercy, a word of conviction and salvation, will be last: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’”