

“The Word Has Gone Out”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, July 21, 2019

Amos 8

In the dead heat of summer, I am reading the bitter prophecies of the 8th century prophet Amos, and I wonder, why can't I be looking at readings about happy things? But no, today I get this: “I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs onto lamentation; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.”

Amos the prophet receives five visions from God that are recorded in Chapters 8 and 9. In our scripture today we hear about the vision of the basket of summer fruit. “This is what the Lord God showed me – a basket of summer fruit. He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” And he said to me, “The end has come upon my people Israel. I will never again pass them by.”

Why summer fruit? This will be the last basket of summer fruit because there will be no more seasons of harvest. For us, these will be the last tomatoes that you will taste from your garden, the last strawberries you will pick, the last apples you will see on the tree.

But the vision leaves the worst for the end. Verse 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. 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.” This truly scared me: not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord, and not being able to find it.

What would it be like to not be able to hear the word of God? I don't even know where to begin. How do I imagine my way forward without hearing that Word that guides me, informs me, challenges me, leads me? I was at a funeral this past week with my husband Keith, for his cousin, Edward Oldham. The service was held at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Scarborough. We sang Abide With Me. I'd been mulling over Amos for a few days and as I sang this hymn, I was struck by the words of verse 3: “I need your presence every passing hour; Who like yourself, my guide and stay can be? Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.” Hearing God is part of the bedrock of our faith. Our Creed ends with, God is with us, we are not alone. God's words spoken through the prophet Amos threaten what I thought was an iron-clad relationship between God and myself, that God will always be there and I will always be able to hear that voice of reassurance and hope.

“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.” How would we imagine a world without hearing the word of God ringing true, a famine of hearing the words of God?

Reality is, we're in that world now. The noise of the world drowns out the Word. We've obliterated the silences with social media, instant access, layer upon layer of fractious relationships in society, in local and national politics, in worldwide relationships.

Barbara Brown Taylor is my favourite woman preacher in North America. She has retired from being an Anglican priest but continues to write her books that come from a deep place within her as she observes and marvels at the presence of God in her and the world about her. In her book, "When God is Silent" she writes about a workshop she attended where a fellow minister shared a recurring dream she had, or rather nightmare: "I have this recurrent nightmare", she said. "I had it again last night. In the dream, I die and find myself standing before the house of God. When I knock, the door blows open and it is clear no one has lived there for a very long time. The place is vacant. There are dust balls everywhere." She looked at us, swamped with grief. "All I want is to hear God call me by name. I would give anything just to hear God say my name."

After this, Barbara wrote, "Her peers were sympathetic. At least one suggested that she find a good therapist with whom she could exorcize the spirit of that dream, and perhaps that person was right. Maybe those of us who are haunted by God's silence are blocked in some way, stopped up so that we cannot hear what we are supposed to hear. Maybe we do need professional help, but it seems entirely possible to me that what we are sensing is true. For reasons beyond our understanding, the sovereign God is not so talkative anymore."¹ She then quotes Amos: "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."

Barbara improvised on the Amos passage: "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 ... I shall let them choke on the dead husks of their own words until they beg me for fresh bread from heaven."²

It seems like this past week I've heard lots of people choke on the dead husks of their own words. Premier Ford called a prisoner with schizophrenia, a nut case: "Thursday morning, Ford called into a Toronto talk radio show to talk about Zhebin Cong, a patient at the city's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) who was found not criminally responsible for the 2014 murder of his roommate. Cong, who has schizophrenia, left CAMH unaccompanied on July 3 and boarded a flight out of the country, according to police. Ford called the man a "nutcase" and said his government has to make changes so that "crazy" people aren't on the street."³

Across the border, President Trump suggested to four duly elected Congresswomen to go back to the country they came from (and 3 of them were born on American soil), in retaliation for their pressure on his government's immigration policies. All four women are black. At a rally the crowds yelled, 'Send her back', referencing the one Congresswoman who was born in

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*, (Boston: Cloister Books, 1998), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/doug-ford-nutcase-zhebin-cong_ca_5d30d604e4b020cd9940d106

Somalia but is an American citizen. This has erupted once again into a media explosion on his racist comments.

Church historian and author of *Grounded*, Diana Butler Bass wrote a column for cnn.com yesterday about her shock at hearing the crowd at the Trump rally chanting, ‘send her back.’ Later in the column she struggles to discern what is going on with Christianity, quoting stats of Trump’s base which includes a high percentage of white Christians.

How do you preach God’s word into this chaos?

A number of my Chicago DMin friends from last year wrote theses which reflected the chaotic political landscape in which they preach. How do you preach to a ‘purple’ church is the popular discussion now – a purple church is one that is made up of Democrats and Republicans, blue and red, making purple. How do you preach into this reality? Diana Butler Bass commented in her CNN article, “White clergy friends have reported to me that angry congregants have intimidated them after preaching a political sermon with threats to rescind donations or to have them fired.”

And we wonder why the word of God is not heard in the land.

Willis Jenkins, Professor of Social Ethics at Yale Divinity School wrote, “The prophet must find ways to silence languages of a people’s gods and goods long enough to let the words of justice be heard.”⁴ Do we say through our silence to Doug Ford, it’s ok to call someone a nutcase and that people with mental health issues are crazy? We’re coming up to a Canadian Federal election in the Fall and it will get ugly before it gets better – over issues of immigration, indigenous rights, and climate crisis.

God places a bowl of summer fruit before Amos and said what do you see. He said, I see a bowl of fruit. If you leave that bowl of fruit out in this summer’s heat, that fruit will decay and rot. Likewise, if we can’t find a way to silence the language of a people’s gods, like Ford and Trump’s populism, long enough to hear God’s words of justice, the fruit will rot. How do we bring moral imagination back into the discussions?

God’s love for us is so deep that God’s voice is a part of everything we look at, every person we see. The whole created order cannot help but sing in response to the perfection of every created animal, plant, star, child, adult. So yes, even though the bowl of fruit is starting to rot and decay, God’s voice still sounds out. The Word can’t help but be heard.

The past few weeks I have been blessed with a very small voice that sings its birdsong in an apple tree in the orchard at the farm. I looked the bird up – because I knew its song was unusual. Henslow’s Sparrow: “A secretive sparrow of the fields, easily overlooked were it not for its odd song. Song: a poor vocal effort; a hiccupping ti-slick.”⁵ Only two notes in length. He only has 2 notes to sing. Those are his notes. Henslow’s Sparrows are decreasing in number. And yet here it is in my backyard this season, perched in the top of this apple tree.

⁴ Feasting on the Word, Theological, 248.

⁵ Roger Tory Peterson, *A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies*, 1980, p. 238.

Amos's prophecy said, "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." But I found it. The other morning, it was 5 am and it was starting to pour outside, an absolute deluge. But into this pounding rain, the Henslow Sparrow continued to tilt back its head, and enthusiastically pour out its two notes with all that it was worth. Truly, its word has gone out. And it's a song of hope. It's a song of joy. Its God's love sung out to the universe, and into my heart.

They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it. But I found it. God's word is in my heart.

Thanks be to God. Amen.