

“Why So Angry?”
Amos 8:1-12

Today we are going to be looking at one of the vision of the Prophet Amos, but before we get to that, I would like to talk to you about another visionary. This visionary is from our modern times and his visions are about the results of the World Cup for soccer. I am referring to Paul, the oracle octopus, who has been in the news for the last few weeks. In case you have not heard or read about Paul, the story is that Paul who is a two-year-old octopus has psychic powers. Paul was able to predict which soccer team was going to win and every time Paul seemed to get it right. On Monday Paul was given a replica of the World Cup as a reward for his eight-for-eight record in picking matches as people betted their money based on Paul's selections. Imagine people worldwide betting thousands of dollars based on the predictions and psychic abilities of an octopus! I wish more of this kind of attention is paid to the visions of true prophets in our world. Imagine how different our world would be if we betted our money on the words of Amos, for example.

While Amos was not predicting the results of a soccer match, his visions were given to reveal to the people of Israel much needed guidance for their times. Amos was a sheep herder in a small village in Judah of ancient Israel around the year 750 BCE. He moved up to the northern kingdom of Israel and began to prophesy there. He lived in a difficult time for the people of Israel. On the surface, things didn't look that bad. In fact, to many at that time, things seemed to be going great for the nation of Israel. There was wealth and trade. Religion flourished in that period of time with big temples and sanctuaries. There were many rich people who had winter and summer homes. There was a lot of entertainment and signs of prosperity everywhere. But this didn't impress Amos at all because he could see underneath all that façade the realities of the people. Many of the people of Israel at that time had forgotten about true faith, the faith of their ancestors. Reducing people to mere commodities, selling on the Sabbath, shorting measures and cutting corners became part of the daily experience of the people of Israel. Greed and wealth replaced the word of God to love others and take care of the widows, the strangers and the orphans. This reality was not so visible to all. But to those who knew that their faith demanded economic justice and that everyone would have enough to survive, the economic system of Israel became a power of evil and oppression. What Amos saw in his visions was that the people of Israel were heading towards self-destruction. That is why he felt compelled to speak up such harsh words in a time of relevant prosperity. The vision we read about today is that of a ripe summer fruit basket. This was not a gift to the people to enjoy, but more like a warning sign. There is a play on words in the original Hebrew of this text where the word for summer fruit is “qayits” and the word for end is “qets.” This play on words shows that the summer fruit while appearing to be a sign of prosperity for Israel is in fact a sign of the end of Israel as a nation. What made the prophet Amos so upset about the systems of his nation was the reality of injustice which they produced. He knew that injustice, greed and exploitation could only lead a nation to its end. This was not what God called them to do. The people of Israel were an oppressed minority and God helped them find justice, but they seemed to forget about their own history. The harsh words of judgment which Amos spoke were meant to get the attention of the people. But even these harsh words didn't get the attention of the people in power and they had to learn the hard way when their nation was conquered by the Assyrians in 725 BCE and the people were deported. Within 25 years the Northern Kingdom of Israel went from a regional power to a failed state.

So, how do these harsh words of Amos speak to us today? Could they help us today to pay attention to God's will and presence in the world? Of course it is easier to listen to predictions

that help us with our bets on soccer matches than to listen to the words of Amos, especially as it seems that he was in such a foul angry mood. Yet, I think his words and visions can help us as the people of God to examine our world and our lives to see how they are aligned with God's intention for love and justice in communities. Regardless of the specifics of history, people from time to time struggle with the same issues of greed, power, violence, injustice and exploitation. The words of Amos may not address the exact situations in which we find our world but they certainly help us to be mindful of God's calling us to faith, love and service of others, especially those who are poor and in need.

One of the aspects which this vision of Amos highlights that is especially relevant to us today is the need for us as people of faith in the world to examine the structures and systems of our world to see if they are just or oppressive. Often times when we think of sin or injustice, we tend to think of our personal sins and how our personal and moral behavior can be working against God's intentions. This is especially true when we talk about wealth and the economy. But when we do that, we tend to miss the big picture. It is important for each of us to consume less and to be good stewards of our resources. However, the big picture of community is what the prophet Amos was concerned about. It is what we would call today structural sin. It is when the system becomes oppressive that we need to call it back to faithfulness.

In his book, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, Walter Wink defines this concept powerfully. He notes that, "Every business corporation, school, denomination, bureaucracy, sports team — indeed, social reality in all its forms — is a combination of both visible and invisible, outer and inner, physical and spiritual." These systems, institutions, and structures can do good and evil at the same time, "They form a complex web that we can neither ignore nor escape." Both Amos and Wink call us to discern the spirit of our institutions and systems to always hold them accountable to the measures of God's justice and love. Wink ends with a clarion call to seek God in our enemies, to practice justice in prayer, and to work every day for the "freeing of the Powers."

In *Living the Questions* study series, Marcus Borg writes that, "Systemic justice is concerned with the way the structures of society work. . . . The litmus test for whether or not a system is just is this: Look at the results. Systemic justice is a result-oriented justice. A system that produces a pretty large and radically impoverished class of people is an unjust system. No matter how fair the rules are enforced and no matter how democratically those rules are made — it's not a just society."

This is hard to translate into our daily lives. It is hard to translate into the daily realities of our world. After all, we the people of First Presbyterian Church of Batavia live in a small community that does not have a great impact on the way things are done in our state capitol or in Washington, D.C. Yet, the call of faith is for us to continue to struggle with such issues of justice and care. Our awareness, our prayers and our actions do make a difference in God's world and if every small community takes responsibility for creating and sustaining just systems, our whole world can be transformed or at least our immediate communities. We also have to remember that the harsh words of judgment which Amos spoke don't end there. His prophecies actually end with an affirmation of God's mercy. In chapter 9, we see that Amos, despite his anger and frustration, can see the potential for the systems of oppression created by the people to be redeemed and transformed by God's mercy. We cannot ever give up on bringing justice into our community because God never gives up on us. In fact, the greatest tool to bring transformation into our world systems of domination is to have hope and to affirm the goodness of God's creation and the goodness of humanity.

In his book, *Peaceable Kingdom*, Stanley Hauerwas writes, "Christian ethics...is not first of all concerned with 'Thou shalt' or 'Thou shalt not.' Its first task is to help us rightly envision the world...In other words, the enterprise of Christian ethics primarily helps us to see. We only act within the world we can envision, and we can envision the world rightly only as we are trained to see." Our faith is about helping us to see and create a new vision for our world. As Walter Wink puts it, "To exercise this discernment, we need eyes to see the invisible. To break the spell of delusion, we need a vision of God's domination-free order, and a way to implement."

This is not about creating a certain political or social system. It is about transforming the systems we have to be free of domination and exploitation. The most important question we should ask is not whether it is Republican or Democratic politics or any other politics. It is whether the system produces more domination or more freedom and justice for all the common good. It is about discerning the spirit of the system. The story is told about a group of political activists were attempting to show a great spiritual teacher how their ideology would change the world. The teacher listened carefully. The following day he said, "An ideology is as good or bad as the people who make use of it. If a million wolves were to organize for justice, would they cease to be a million wolves?"

It is said Helen Keller was once asked if there was anything worse than being blind. She replied, "Having no vision." May the vision of Amos challenge us to see new visions for our world and our lives! Amen.