

O FOR A WORD FROM THE LORD!

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto, CA
September 18, 1983

Amos 8:4-12

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor 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, to seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it (Revised Standard Version). They will look everywhere for a message from the Lord, but they will not find it. They will hunger and thirst for a word from the Lord" (Amos 8.11-12) (Good News Translation). Very strong words, uncomfortable words, from the prophet Amos.

Amos predicted a time or times when the Lord would withhold his voice, times of silence, times of great heart hunger, a yearning, a desperate craving for a "word from the Lord."

Amos might very well have been speaking centuries ahead of his time, and speaking to us, to our society today. "Running to and from...seeking a word from the Lord," is an apt description of Americans. Is the word in the accumulation of things? Is the word in pleasure? Is the word in drugs or alcohol? Is the word in popular religion, in t-v religion? Is the word in eastern religions? We run to and fro, hardly stopping long enough to eat, running to and fro to where? Why? Is the Lord silent today? Have you personally heard a word from the Lord lately?

Let's back up a step and look at the reasons for Amos' harsh words of warning. Why was Amos warning the people of the possibility that there would come a famine of hearing a word from the Lord?

Amos was a shepherd during the reign of King Jeroboam, probably around 760 B.C. He was proud of the fact that he was not formally trained like the temple prophets who mouthed sermons that the people wanted to hear, and of which the king would approve. Amos lived in comfortable times, just before the invasion of the Assyrians who would deal Israel such a blow that it would not survive. Israel was doomed as a nation. Judah, called Judea by the time of Jesus, which housed the capitol at Jerusalem, would survive for another century, but Israel was doomed. No one saw it. No one would believe it, except for Amos, who was not very popular.

Amos read the signs of the times, and predicted that the judgment of God was coming upon them. They would not listen to the words of God, so the time would come when God would no longer speak, but act.

The people would not, and could not hear, the firm, strong voice of the Lord, said Amos, because of their comfortable pride. Amos lived in a time of prosperity on the edge of decline. Sounds uncomfortably close to our own situation. The upper class of Israel had accumulated great wealth. They built palaces and summer cottages. They lived in proud security, oblivious, ignorant, insensitive to what was happening around them, deaf to the word of God, insulted and angered by the preacher, Amos, who tried so desperately to warn them.

Judgment was coming upon them, said Amos, primarily because of the disparity between the haves and the have nots, the wide gulf separating the upper class from the lower class, the rich from the little people. The poor were sold into slavery for a pair of shoes. For insignificant debts, the poor lost everything. The poor had no recourse in the courts for the courts were controlled by the powerful. There was bribery, graft, corruption, cheating. Even the scales upon which grain and currency were weighed were tampered.

And, at the same time, religion was very popular. People went on pilgrimages to the temples, took part in noisy festivals, partied, if you will, but partied oblivious to the will of God. Amos said their very worship was a profaning of the temple. The Lord said, according to Moses in 5:21-24, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...Take away the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."

They even in their ignorance anticipated, looked forward to "the day of the Lord", the final manifestation of God's judgment - power and victory. Because, said Amos, they identified God's interests with theirs and the day of the Lord - will be a time of surprise for them. I wonder about the many enthusiasts of our day who have given up on our culture and are anticipating the second coming of Jesus. It is so easy to believe God is on our side.

There is a widespread disillusionment in our country today. I picked up a book this week by Robert Ringer, How You Can Find Happiness During the Collapse of Western Civilization. He is perfectly serious. I disagreed with his analysis, but he at least is serious. In Modesto we have several Christian bookstores. Most of the books, at least those displayed, are in my opinion, junk. Most of them are on the second coming theme: "Things are so bad, Jesus is coming soon to end it all." There is a feeling of disillusionment and discouragement among us. Have you seen the poster, "There's only one thing wrong with the rat race - the rats are winning."

Therefore, Amos' analysis and heavy preaching are very relevant to us. The disparity between the very rich and the very poor in our world is so vast it is causing a revolution, a revolution that affects every arena of life. But most of us do not realize we are living in a revolution. We are unaware and oblivious, not hearing the word of the Lord; thereby, disillusioned and frightened of what is happening.

Amos says that to be oblivious is dangerous. To ignore what is happening, to ignore the plight, the suffering of people, the injustice and oppression, is to ignore the will of God. To ignore God's word is to bring judgment.

It is so tempting to bask in the luxury of the peninsula and forget the world. It is so tempting to live here in blind, comfortable, secure pride. Ringer points out that the revolution came and went while Americans were watching Monday Night football, sipping their bottles of Miller Lite, and stuffing themselves with Big Macs.

Oblivious and insensitive. A young girl witnessed the holocaust in Nazi Germany. She saw her parents killed and narrowly escaped herself. Immigrating to the United States, for years she told no one of her story. It stayed bottled up within her. One day in an English class she felt the need to face her past and tell her story. She wrote an essay. When the paper was returned, it had a grade of D-, because of poor sentence structure, organization of paragraphs, spelling, etc. The teacher: oblivious and insensitive.

Where are the Christians? Gordon Dahl cynically wrote, "Most middle class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship." The fundamentalists throng to their churches, growing by leaps and bounds, to hear how they can be personally saved from the collapse of western civilization because Jesus will soon come and rescue them, by and large fundamentalists ignore the social ills, the injustices, the threat of global extinction by nuclear weapons. And the mainline Christians? Dean Kelley, in discussing parental reaction to their children becoming involved with intense movements, says the parents just don't understand what is going on. He wrote, "They expect religion to be avocational and placid like the corner Methodist Church. They're threatened by a son's or daughter's involvement in something intense and life-transforming."

You might think I'm quite depressing this morning; you might think I'm negative, cynical or discouraged. Actually, this sermon is one of hope. I struggled long and

hard with the Amos passage for this sermon. Amos is called the dooms-day prophet, but Amos lived in the kind of times where the people just would not listen, nor heed the signs of the times. The hope for us lay in our ability to read the signs, and to hear the word of God. Someone has said, "When illusion is gone, hope may be born." When we see what the world is truly like, when we recognize the suffering of people, and respond with a Christ-like love, when we let the Holy Spirit move among us, then we will move from a placid corner Methodist Church religion to one of power, hope and love.

God is speaking these days. Have you had a word from the Lord? How does God speak? Amos says God speaks primarily through natural and historical events. God speaks through foreign invasions, the threat of Assyria on the horizon. God speaks through crises, disasters. Sometimes we don't hear the wee, small voice of God, and he has to hit us with a 2x4. Those of us who live in this generation have been hit time and again with a 2x4. Those of you who are new to this church may not know that our church has been through a series of crises, seriously crippling our membership. God speaks through such crises. Several of our people have told me, "No longer are we a proud church." If that is so, if pride was one of our past sins, then, praise God, God got through to us. If we are indeed no longer proud, no longer trusting in our own greatness of illusions of grandeur, then we can simply put our trust in the grace of God, trust in the Holy Spirit, and not ourselves. When illusion is gone, hope may be born.

God speaks through crises. When you have a crises, life falls apart, sickness or job or marriage. The word is in there, if you can see it and hear it. If you have "the ears to hear, and the eyes to see," said Jesus.

"They shall run to and fro," said Amos, "Looking for a word from the Lord." God speaks loudly to us these days in the midst of the revolution that is occurring, calling us to be sensitive, awake, alive, and faithful to do his will. Hear the word of the Lord. When illusion is gone, hope may be born.

"O FOR A WORD

FROM THE LORD!"

AMOS 8:4-12

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

SEPTEMBER 18, 1983