

A Famine on the Land

Scripture: Amos 8:1-12 (The Inclusive Bible)

Last week we were introduced to Amos, one of the lesser prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Amos introduced us to God's plumb line. This ancient prophet told us what it means to live on YHWH's true vertical. And we found out that God is most concerned about how we treat other people, especially the poor. We were reminded of the importance of loving our neighbour no matter who they are or what they believe. We were reminded to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

But what we didn't talk about last Sunday was what happens when we end up off the true vertical, when we are not living according to God's plumb line. Today's reading describes what the consequences can be. Amos quotes YHWH saying:

I will make the sun set at noon,
and darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into funerals
And all your happy songs into dirges.

Amos is prophesying a brutal time of darkness and despair. Now one thing I should note is that Amos, like all the prophets in the Old Testament, believed in a wrathful God, a God of judgement. The ancient prophets believed that when bad things happened it was because God was punishing the Israelites for their wrongdoing. So if a plague appeared on the land, if there was a prolonged drought, or if their army lost in battle, it meant that God was angry with the Israelites. It meant that somehow they had messed up.

I want to be clear that this is not the God that I believe in. I believe in a God that is the Essence of Love, a God that loves us no matter what we do or say or even think. I believe dark times happen not because of God but despite God.

Sometimes bad things happen because of the decisions that we make, or the actions that we take. Sometimes bad things happen because of the cruelty or frailty of other people. And sometimes bad things happen for no reason at all.

According to the prophet Amos, the Israelites were about to experience a very dark time. At Bible Study this week we talked about the kinds of dark times that nations or cities or towns can experience. Skyrocketing inflation can certainly cause great suffering and pain. So can natural disasters such as floods or fires, or even pandemics. At this time of year heat waves can cause death and devastation. The Ukrainian people have been living in darkness for months because of Russia's military invasion of their country. In the United States many would argue that the Supreme Court's decision to turn back Roe vs. Wade will also result in dark times.

These are all brutal events that happen to communities, provinces, countries and even the world. But I would argue that none of these "dark times" are caused by God's anger or need for retribution. Some may be directly, or indirectly caused by the sins or frailties of humankind, but others are nobody's fault at all. As an example, in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote,

When people ask, "Where was God in Auschwitz? How could [God] have permitted the Nazis to kill so many innocent men, women, and children?," my response is that it was not God who caused it. It was caused by

human beings choosing to be cruel to their fellow [human beings].
Kushner, Harold S.. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (p. 91). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

In today's reading Amos is prophesying that the cruel actions of the rich and powerful in his society are going to lead to a time of darkness for those who are straying from God's true vertical. This prophecy may be true, but it won't happen because the God of Love feels the need to punish them. It could happen as a result of their exploitation and oppression of the poor or it could happen because of the actions of others (possibly another nation) or it could happen as the result of some random event. God has given humankind free will and much of what happens to us is the result of our own actions.

It is also true that dark times can happen to individuals or families. I can remember a prolonged time of darkness in my own life when my first long-term relationship ended. It was a time of loneliness, depression and deep grief. Most often dark times happen because of loss: the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of a home, the loss of health, the loss of physical or mental ability or the loss of a relationship.

No matter what type of loss has occurred I don't believe it is ever correct to suggest that God wanted or needed it to happen. God does not need our loved ones to die, our health to diminish or our house to burn down. In fact, I believe the Essence of Love mourns with us whenever bad things happen and that God's unconditional love is there to sustain and comfort us in all situations.

The problem is that sometimes we don't realize that the Ground of our Being is with us. When God seems to disappear for an extended period of time, then the term "dark night of the soul" is often used. Amos prophesied that this would happen to the Israelites. He described it as follows:

The time is coming—
it is the Sovereign YHWH who speaks—
when I will send famine on the land:
not a famine of bread or thirst for water,
but a famine of not hearing the words of YHWH.
People will stagger from sea to sea
and wander from north to east
seeking revelation from YHWH,
but will not find it.

Again I would suggest that this particular dark time is not caused by God but rather happens despite God. God does not leave us alone. But it is true that there are times in our lives when it feels like we are alone, when we are unable to recognize God's presence with us. Sometimes the cause of our spiritual famine is obvious – a deep loss, a difficult situation, mental illness, or another life-altering event. Sometimes it happens because we have strayed from God's love, from God's true vertical and have found some other idol such as alcohol, drugs, money, gambling, sex, fame or power. And sometimes a dark night of the soul happens for no reason at all.

The important thing to remember, especially in the midst of this darkness, this spiritual famine, is that the Essence of Love is there even when we are unable to perceive its loving presence. The ending of our United Church creed says "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God." One of the hardest things in life is holding on to that belief even when we

are “staggering from sea to sea and wandering from north to east” in search of some sign of the Sacred.

It is in such times that we can be thankful for family and community and, in particular, for this faith community in which we gather. When we struggle to pray for ourselves it is helpful to be surrounded by a community in prayer. When we struggle to sing God’s praises it is helpful to be surrounded by a community in song. When we struggle to feel God’s loving presence, it is helpful to experience the loving support of a community of faith.

When we experience those inevitable dark times in our lives and in the life of our community and country may we all find the support that we need and experience the healing power of God’s everlasting love. May it be so. Amen.