

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 10, 2016

**"WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO HEAR"**

by Mary Anne Biggs

Amos 7:7-17 ~ Luke 10:25-37

I admire you for staying in worship this morning after you opened your bulletins and read the sermon title, *"What We Don't Want to Hear."* In fact, I appreciate the way you come here week after week and listen. A lot of people don't bother to do that these days. They don't particularly care what God has to say, and they certainly don't trust preachers to speak a word from God. I'm sure you know, or at least I hope you do, that preaching isn't an easy task. I'm not here to entertain you. I'm not here to make you feel good about yourself ... or bad about yourself ... if that is what you prefer. I'm not even here to inspire you. All I'm trying to do is to get you to listen to God. My whole goal is to help us hear what I think God wants to tell us.

But I want you to know... that I know ... that the one thing harder than preaching the word of God ... is hearing the word of God. Your task is more difficult than mine. I have all week to marinate on a passage and try to hear what it is saying. You have less than twenty minutes to hear and respond. I have all week to plan how I'm going to break through the barriers and distractions and try to get across some clear word. You have a few minutes to decide what God is saying to you. And although I know that most of us only think about listening to God on Sundays ... we are told that God speaks to us *"in many and various ways,"* according to the author of Hebrews (1:1). Is anybody listening?

To be sure, it's hard to hear the word of the Lord above all the outside noise in our lives. On the outside, you have those preachers who *"speak in the tongues of mortals and angels but have not love"* so they have become as *"a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal"* (I Cor 13:1). They use the Bible to bash people they don't even know. They use the Bible to build kingdoms... raise revenue ... and live the high life themselves by playing on our fears and appealing to our worst side. On the outside you have the voices of media and commerce to tell you what you should wear ... what music you should listen to ... what you should buy ... what you should think. On the outside you have those societal sirens that tell you that money is the root of all happiness ... that violence is the best way to solve problems ... that you should go along to get along with the powers that be ... that you should keep consuming ... that you shouldn't make waves. All those voices on the outside can be deafening. And on the inside you have your own negative tapes chiming in all the time with anxieties and insecurities ... telling you that you can't do it ... that you aren't worthy ... that you're too tired ... that you're just one person ... that you better take care of yourself first ... that you can't afford to make any changes in your life right now. And with all this noise, with all those outside and inside voices, how can we hear the word of the Lord?

Of course, the biggest obstacle to our hearing the Word of the Lord is our own resistance to it. God has things to tell us that we don't always want to hear. We are all quite good at denial. When someone tells us, "Your drinking is out of control" ... "you're emotionally unavailable to

your family" ... "you're not living up to expectations at work" ... "you shouldn't do that thing you want to do" ... we get defensive. We blame somebody else. Or we seek a second opinion until we hear the opinion we want. But we have trouble hearing the truth when it means we need to change.

God invites us with a word of grace. But what God invites us to is holy living. God offers us eternal security. But God shows us we have no security at all in money, arms, or power. God accepts and loves us. But God is angered when we do harm to others with our behavior ... or allow injustices to continue unopposed. Jesus calls us to follow him, but answering his call is expensive. It costs you your life to gain your soul.

We have trouble hearing, so sometimes God goes to extraordinary ends to create a listening readiness in us. According to the Bible, God sends special messengers called "prophets." We don't usually hear them because we're pursuing the other kind of "profits." But God sends them anyway ... gives us the courtesy of a warning ... like a registered notice you get in the mail. God cares enough about us to urge us to turn off the road that leads over a cliff.

Amos didn't plan to be a prophet. He wasn't in the minister's council. He didn't go to seminary. Nobody ordained him. He wasn't even the son of a prophet, and in those days, people usually took up the profession of their parents. No, Amos was a shepherd and a gardener ... a migrant farm worker if you will. He traveled north from his home in Judah to the kingdom of Israel to do his work. And what he saw there appalled him ... land owners and business people cheating the poor ... government ruling ruthlessly to protect the powerful at the expense of the weak ... and religious leaders defending all this as God's will ... because the government protected their power. Still, Amos might have just kept his mouth shut and gone home. But he couldn't do that because, as he says, "the word of the Lord came unto me."

Amos stood up in the northern kingdom and said, "*The Lord roars from Zion. Thus says the Lord!*" That got their attention. Amos said, "*God is going to destroy Syria for their aggression against us!*" And all the people said, "Amen!" (Don't we love it when the preacher badmouths our enemies for their sins? That's the truth we want to hear!) Amos said, "*God is going to smash the Philistines for the damage they've done to our people!*" And all the people said, "Amen! That's right! Preach it, preacher!" Amos said, "*God is going to crush the Phoenecians for allying with our enemies against us!*" And all the people said, "Amen! Keep going! Keep going!" He kept going. He didn't leave anybody out. Amos said, "*God's going to punish Edom ("Yeah!") and Ammon ("You know it!") and Moab (Let `em have it, Lord!)*" He didn't even leave out his own native land. Amos said, "God will judge Judah for their unfaithfulness and Jerusalem shall fall." "Oh, yeah," his audience agreed. "Amen and amen! Hallelujah!" (Amos 1:1-2:5) Yes, the Israelites looked forward eagerly to the day when the Lord would finally come and deliver them from all their afflictions. But Amos then told them they had better start looking forward to something else.

*Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals-- they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way; father and son take the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed (Amos 2:6-8).*

And all the people said, "Wait a minute! You're talking about us! Who gave you the right to meddle in our business?" They tried to ignore him, but he wouldn't hush. The people told the priests what he was saying and the priests told the King. Now by the standards of our day, Jereboam was a good King. The economy was healthy ... the military was strong ... Israel was a power to be reckoned with ... and a lot of people were well off. But what the King and the generals and the priests and the fabulously well to do didn't see ... didn't want to see ... refused to see ... was how they were making their fortunes on the backs of the poor ... how desperate the dispossessed had become ... and how far they had actually wandered from the society their God proposed. But God saw the poor. God saw the injustice. God saw the misplaced faith. And God saw the lies their priests were telling them in God's name. So God sent Amos to tell them the truth and to warn them where their behavior was taking them.

The King sent the head priest to warn Amos, and I guess it shouldn't surprise us that the religious powers were no more attuned to God's voice than the King was. Sometimes the religious people are the most hardhearted power-mongers of all. Amaziah, the King's priest, prayed with him in the Rose Garden. "Hush, Amos," Amaziah said. "Hush and go home. Hush, or we'll "distance" ourselves from you. Hush, or we'll kick you out of the convention. Hush, or we'll embarrass you. Hush, and we'll make you a member of the Church Council. Hush, and we'll give you a few shekels to help the needy. Hush, Amos, or we'll kill you." But Amos couldn't be bought or bullied or battered into hushing up. He kept right on telling the King, and the military, and the business people, and the priests, and the people that the Word of the Lord against them. It was a grace, because it was a warning. If they would only hear and respond and change their ways, the Lord would relent. But they would not listen to the Word of the Lord. Will we?

God invites us with a word of grace, and Jesus calls us to follow him, but answering his call is expensive. As Frederick Buechner puts it:

*The gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts, chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding to be sure, but also bled for.*

The gospel isn't safe and it isn't easy. The author of Hebrews says, "*The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.*" (Heb 4:12-13). He isn't talking about how the Bible is a weapon in our hands against other people ... but how the Word of God lays us open and tells us the truth about ourselves that we don't want to hear ... so that we will hear the Word of God and be healed. But do we have the courage to listen? God sent Amos to Israel, but Israel would not listen to the Word of the Lord. Will we?

I'm not talking today about shaming certain groups of people and excluding others because of what they believe ... or don't believe ... or the way they were born ... or even the mistakes they have made. I'm talking about God's indictment against us all. I'm talking about the things in our own way of life and the systems in our society that we don't want to see. For instance, the story of the good Samaritan is a lovely tale ... but will we hear the word that the only requirement that God cares about in our helping the needy is that they need help? The love of God is a message

we all want to claim ... but will we let the love of God lay claim on all our living and the way we treat others?

Will we listen to the Word of the Lord? Better still, will we have the courage to speak it? An atheist friend of Martin Copenhaver gave him this critique of liberal preaching ... "In sermons today you hear what the psychologist says, what the historian says, what the New York Times editorial writer says, and then the sermon concludes with, 'And perhaps Jesus said it best'"

Friends, the day is past when the church should try to make the gospel palatable and acceptable and utterly inoffensive to American society. *Because it isn't.*

The day is also past when people want their preachers to shame and harangue them into feeling guilty because feeling guilty lets us off the hook. *Because it doesn't.*

But the day is *always* here for us to speak the truth in love ... to speak the truth to power ... to tell the world that God alone is sovereign ... and that God cares about every person ... especially the poor and marginalized ... and those who can't speak for themselves ... whose voices are not heard because they can make no campaign contributions. The day is *always* here for us to preach the bad news that we haven't got it right yet ... that we need to change. Or let us at least be honest where we aren't yet willing to change ... and throw ourselves on the mercy of God. The day is *always* here for us to preach the good news that God loves us as we are but loves us too much to leave us as we are. That's all I have to say today. What is God telling you? "Let all who have ears hear the word of the Lord."

May we pray?

God, you always listen to us when we pray. You hear us worry about our little lives when you carry a whole hurting world. You listen to us whine about our little woes while so many of your other children are crushed by poverty or blown apart by bombs. Thank you for listening and caring, but teach us how to listen to you. When we're reading the Bible, when we're perusing the paper, when we're watching television, when we're talking to each other, from our worst enemy and our best friend, all the time, in every way, make us alert to hear your voice and do your will because none of those voices love us like you love us, and only you have the words that lead to eternal life in Jesus' name. Amen.