

“Listening for a Vision”
Amos 8:1-8; Micah 6:6-8
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, July 21, 2019

This morning’s scripture reading is the FOURTH in a series of FIVE visions found in the book of the prophet Amos. These visions MOVE from a sense of forgiveness, to an ever more *dissonant* sense of judgment.

In this morning’s reading there is quite a bit of judgment. And it doesn’t really resolve. And that bothers me. Like a dissonant chord in a song, that instead of pulling us to a new place through its eventual resolution, just hangs there, unresolved.

I think that most of us would rather start with the judgment, if we even want to listen to it at all, and then move as quickly as possible to resolution, and forgiveness. Anyway that’s my inclination. But that’s not what the Biblical text does. Amos moves more and more to a sense of dissonance, and judgment. Away from forgiveness.

It all starts in chapter 7 with a vision of some locusts. The prophet begs God for forgiveness. And God’s judgment relents. THEN there is a vision of a plum line held next to a wall - - the text from **last week**, where Amaziah didn’t want to see the judgment Amos was showing him. / So this is a “part two” if you who were here last week...

Last week Amaziah didn’t want to SEE the vision of the plum line. / AND then - - by the time we get to chapter 8. Here in today’s reading, the text ends ominously. And the prophet seems to encourage us to open our ears, and listen to the dissonance. So, may we hear what God might be saying to us, through this troubling vision....

As we do, I encourage you to open your Bibles and read along. I do this because this morning, both word and music will be the vehicle for the scripture reading. So open your ears to words, and chords...and your eyes to the words on the page...

Amos is found after the major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, but before Micah and Zephaniah. Just near the end of the Old Testament.

Or if you have the courage and inclination, just close your eyes and listen.

[read text, Amos 8:1-8 - - WITH jazz chords...?]

Biblical prophecy IS intended to change the future. And Biblical prophecy is NOT prediction. Maybe that's why it is often ignored, rejected, or even suppressed. Because as much as we'd like to know the future so we could plan better - - we'd rather not change. / Last week we saw that Amaziah's rejection of the message is partly because he doesn't want to change. / And maybe his resistance to the message - - is part of why it gets MORE dissonant - - instead of resolving right away...

We want PREDICTIONS we can count on - - and instead - - we get calls for REPENTANCE?! / What?? / Think about it: Not listening to the difficult truth - - doesn't make life any easier. / Wishing a war was over, doesn't end a war.

LAST week we saw that Amaziah didn't want to LOOK at a vision that the prophet Amos showed him. / Today he doesn't want to LISTEN.

There is a Hebrew word play in this Old Testament Biblical text. The word for "ripe fruit", or "summer fruit" (qayis), SOUNDS like the word for "end" (qus). The similarity of the sound - would have evoked an interpretation for those who spoke Hebrew. But if you don't know Hebrew, you can't listen. / A basket of the END!

If you don't open your ears - - you miss the point: the END is coming.

There are plenty of calls for change in our world and our lives...

The question is: will we listen.

Will we open our ears?

Will we be honest about the dissonance?

Will we hear it, before we attempt to resolve it too quickly?

And then will we CHANGE OUR LIVES?

Maybe - - part of how we LISTEN - - is by how we LIVE.

Amaziah didn't want to listen. In our Old Testament reading for this morning, Amaziah was listening to Amos, but couldn't take it. He didn't listen to what he didn't like. As Amos described the sins of Israel, Amaziah was deaf. Israel was stable, and rich, and affluent. Poor people were cheated for economic gain. They sought security through military conquest. There was a place called Bashan in which, there were people Amos described, by comparing them to cows.

So he wasn't tactful. / And you can see why some people didn't want to listen.

He was dissonant and judgmental. / But he also spoke words of truth.

Amaziah had disrespected his wife, and now he wanted her to listen to his advice, instead of listening to her. He'd run out of money, and now he wanted to change the banks around for his own gain. And he didn't want to listen to Amos and his whining about justice for poor people. / But ignoring Amos didn't mean the END would NOT come. / Ignoring Amos didn't make him go away.

And maybe we'd all like him to go away too.

I find him pushy and rude.

Sometimes there doesn't SEEM to be a lot of hope - in Amos' gloomy ranting.

I believe that ultimately Amos DOES have hope - - but...

I sometimes wish - - Amos was more obvious about the hope.

Which gets me to thinking, that maybe - - hope isn't something for good times.

Since the beginning of the church, Christians from time to time have faced overwhelming odds. But they have faced them. And they have done so with hope.

Hope – that comes when, the times get tough.

All Amos does, is tell it like he sees it.

It's our choice what to do about it.

That's the difference between prediction – and prophecy. Prophecy is about changing the future. Hope for the future.

Saying, “The end is coming”, doesn't mean that the end IS coming. But the irony is, that it might, if we say it's not. Think about it.

The Boeing 737 had problems with its design.

Social security is in trouble.

The sea is full of plastic!

And not listening to how bad it was – won't make it get any better.

There must be other examples: in health care, politics, and our own lives.

The issue is to listen.

Open our ears, and listen honestly, to our lives and our world.

Remember what I said about the Hebrew words in this text?

If you don't open your ears, you miss the point of the vision.

That's part of what I mean by, “Listening for a Vision”. It's a little counter-intuitive. Listen. For a vision. But this vision in the Old Testament text can only be interpreted by listening.

So, look around your life. Ask yourself:

What do you hear?

What are you focused on in your life?

What are WE focused on as a people?

Think about what it's like to really focus on something. Sometimes people actually close their eyes to focus. Think about artists. The jazz musician playing, intently listening, with eyes closed. Eyes closed in prayer. Trying to see, with concentration, where God, and the music, and the other players, are leading.

What are our lives focused on?

And what do we hear?

A parent once told me a story about something that happened in worship, on Sunday morning. It was a communion Sunday. A child was sipping his cup of juice.

Sipping it.

The cup of salvation.

A reminder of Christ's blood and the cross.

An ugly dissonant symbol when you really think about it.

And a CHILD - - sipping, ever so slowly, as if to savor every drop.

As if to savor the idea of Christ's love for us.

As if to make it last as long as possible.

May it be so for us as well. May we open ourselves to what God may be saying to us through the words of the prophet. May we not move too quickly through the dissonance. Instead may we be open to it.

May we just sit right there with it. / And do that in hope.

Hope because of God's amazing power.

Ultimately this IS - - ALL about HOPE - - folks!

Listen to the HOPE in another prophet Micah.

But again - - this is hope from the midst of DISSONANCE.

But in this case it's dissonance FIRST - - and then resolution.

First the dissonance in Micah - - chapter 3:

[read Micah 3:9-12]

THEN - - three chapters later - - Micah offers those FAMUOS lines:

[read Micah 6:6-8]

There IS hope for - - justice - - kindness - - and humility in our lives.

There IS hope for our world.

But - think about what moving too quickly to resolution does to God: it minimizes God's amazing powerful love. If we move too quickly to forgiveness, and minimize the judgment, then not that much is being forgiven. If the dissonance isn't all that bad, then the resolution is not nearly as satisfying. And if we run from the depth of life's pain, and sin, and violence, and evil, we end up robbing God of the opportunity to really enter into our full humanity.

I believe God longs to do that.

And that God's love is that powerful. / And that God's Kingdom is that radical.

THAT is where hope comes from - - real hope.

And when I slip into wanting to predict and plan, I try to remember that.

May we all have ears to hear - - and hearts to hope.