

“Fresh Starts Here”

Proper 11: Amos 8:1-12

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From the Pulpit

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Let us pray: You open our eyes to a world which would sell the poor for the price of an SUV, trade the needy for designer apparel, or haul the weak into the local courts. So come, God of Justice, to make us as vocal as Amos.

You watch us as we fill our days with endless work: as we keep a list of all our worries, never marking any off as we get easily distracted by others' inactions. So come, Creation's Oldest Child, to make us as still as Mary.

You take notice of how quickly we can overlook those who hunger for their empty hearts to be filled, for those who long for a family to welcome them, and for those who thirst for that relationship which will revive souls. So come, Reconciling Love, to make us as welcoming as Martha. Amen.

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If you haven't been outdoors this weekend, let me be the first to share with you: we're at the height of summer! For many of us, these hot and long days mark the best time of the year. After all the hard work, after going through all that the first half of the year has brought our way, it's summertime and the part of year we annually look forward to, where we can live our best lives. Every one of us has our own way to enjoy the

season: lay by the pool, vacation at the beach or in the mountains, join in on one of America's pastimes or maybe visit some of the season's best local festivals. Maybe the best image of summer and refresher we need is to go and shop some ripe and fresh produce from the farmer's market.

Who wouldn't love to make a stop by the farm stand to grab some fresh, organic produce on nice summer days like these? This is a widespread summer tradition; marketers step under the shade of the stand to see rows of freshly picked corn, red-ripened tomatoes, and crisp, cold watermelon. The produce always looks delicious and the sweet smell of the stand both envelopes and compels its buyers to indulge. Shoppers come to the stand from every direction, grab shopping bags and fill them to the brim before going to the register, where the cashier is waiting with a smile ready to ring up the buyer's purchase. What a better picture of summer, right?

Only, suddenly, a horrible scream rips through the air, and it's coming from the fields from where all that perfect produce was planted, nourished, and harvested. Just over the cashier's shoulder, the farm stand shoppers discover a female farm worker being assaulted in the back of a pick-up truck by her boss. And as more of the farm comes into focus, shoppers see another worker on one of his knees, a drinking cup on the ground by his side. He's shielding the blows of his boss who's yelling at him, "Did you come here to work, or did you come here to drink water, you lazy sack of bones?" Just at that

moment, the cashier re-establishes eye contact with the customer at the register, and, with a smile, says: “that’ll be \$27.50. Cash or credit?”

In what had been thought to be a lovely annual tradition, one that might bring refreshment, solace, and nourishment, we’re compelled to consider work we’ve left undone. The reading from Amos offers some harsh images of judgment for the people of Israel who have, likewise, left work undone. The basket of summer fruit in Amos’ vision represents Israel and all her people. Her time is ripe for picking and plucking. Like every year’s summer harvest, the end is come for the people of Israel.

The *end*; nothing more beyond this. It’s one of those absolutes we resist when it involves us, if we can comprehend our ends at all. Amos’ words implore us not to rush too quickly to the promises of a new future, beyond judgment. Today’s lesson invites us to consider and face the absolute times of our lives, having no more control over any of them than Amos had over the fate of Israel.

The visual Amos offers can give anyone of us startling pause. Dead bodies will be visible, all around. Darkness will come suddenly, in places and moments unexpected. And then there’s famine, but what kind? Not one like the hunger being experienced in refugee camps and concentration camps, but one where all people - from the movers and shakers to the

lowly and humble - will hunger to hear the words of the Lord. No matter how hard they try, they will not find or hear them. They will hear nothing more beyond this. In Amos' prophetic proclamation, God is completely silencing all of her creation from the words of the Lord that are being misused.

As you can imagine, the God of Amos is angry, really upset. Could Israel have been so ill-willed that God is going to give up on them? As Amos sees it, religion serves only to reassure people that everything is all right, when in fact things are not. Religion says: "be sure to observe the festival days, keep the sanctuaries in good order, and make the proper sacrifices. That will provide a divine guarantee." But are these religious rituals enough? Barbara Brown Taylor says the rich of Israel have used their riches to burden those who will never work their way out of debt [and] the clever have used their cleverness to trick those who cannot think as fast. [She says] making a profit has become more important than anything else in the land, more than even God.¹

Amos is determined Israel to have lost the standard of public morality that was once generally accepted and had provided an ethos enabling people to live together in general harmony. The people of Israel have taken a drastic detour from the Way toward which they are called, and is found, in Amos, living her best life. Israel is having a time of great prosperity. They're holding great feasts and having lots of grain and wheat to sell.

¹ *Home By Another Way*, "Famine in the Land," Barbara Brown Taylor

Her focus is not set on the Sabbath. As a matter of fact, Israel can't wait for Sabbath and the holy festivals to be over so they can get back to selling their goods and building profits. Instead of focusing on the things of God, Amos tells us Israel is set on "trampling on the needy, and bringing ruin to the poor of the land." The scales are off-balanced, set to favor the sellers and not the buyers. According to Amos, God even accuses the people of human trafficking as they are "buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes."

Amos begs the question: If the words of God are being used to lord over our own peoples, why not cut it off at the head? Why not put an end to and silence the abuse? Though Amos' words are quite harsh and seem clear-cut, I'm not so sure the thought of fasting from the words of God will benefit us. I don't know that in hearing Amos words, we're to think God will ever stop speaking to God's people. What does seem to be certain is Amos' invitation to consider our call to put an end to the misuse of God's Word and, subsequently, the abuse of God's people.

Amos is calling us to a new day, a fresh start. The words "new" and "fresh start" sound appealing, but sometimes the word *new* can be just as threatening as the word *end*. Only a faithful, loving God who is in charge - of our lives, our history, our world - can make it possible for us to hear each of those words without shuddering. A fresh start for all of us likely will not truly come until we put an end to modern-day slavery, human

trafficking, xenophobia, pride, and all the other ills that are part of our shared lived experience. Amos pleads with us, we can no longer continue to be consumers in a marketplace that abuses God's Word and God's people. In today's lesson, God's Word is intervening, putting an end to our indulges.

Many of us may remember not too long ago, a group of people from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Fair Food Program visited with us in worship to share with us a lived experience many Americans buy into everyday. They came here to First Church to inform or remind us that farm workers are abused everyday. Each and every day at work, these people are doing holy work while at the same time experiencing wage theft, physical and verbal abuse, even sexual harassment and assault, even slavery - forced labor without pay.

Today, large numbers of farm workers across the country are experiencing fresh starts. This new day is come because of the hard work of CIW and all the people who have bought into the Fair Food Program. Where 80% of female farm workers were reporting rape, harassment, and/or assault at work, millions of dollars are being distributed to the female farm workers in abuse cases.² Where farm workers were being locked away in boxes for days on end, 12-year prison sentences are being delivered in human slavery cases.³ An end to the

² <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/female-farm-workers-awarded-17-million-in-florida-abuse-case/>

³ <http://archive.naplesnews.com/news/local/brothers-receive-12-year-prison-terms-in-immokalee-human-slavery-case-ep-400544123-344259152.html/>

abuses is commenced, and a new image of going to the farm stands is being painted.

Instead of going to purchase produce at the farm stand and witnessing abuse, workers can be seen gathering together in the shade for an education session of their human rights. Other workers are talking with their supervisor about health and safety issues. Farm workers are working at a humane pace in the fields and have a greater sense of dignity. When shoppers like you and me pay for your produce at the register, the cashier sets aside a portion of our purchase price in a box marked “bonus,” explaining that this bonus goes to the harvesters at the end of the week, on top of their working wages.

This is how lives at the farms, spread across the country, are being transformed. Farms, farm workers, and fourteen of the world’s retail food corporations have developed a unique partnership where everyone benefits receiving protected human rights, working conditions that encourages greater productivity, and public relations risks are minimized. And I want you to know these fresh starts aren’t just surfacing here in America. Both the CIW and The Guardian report that the grass isn’t greener on the other side of the ocean. European agriculture suffers from many of the same horrific abuses. Fields are plagued with persistent, and there are horrifying cases of forced labor. All across Europe are reported incidents of sexual violence, and back-breaking work for poverty wages,

if any compensation at all. The underlying, driving force behind the abuse is likewise painfully familiar - a food industry composed of consolidated food retailers leveraging their volume purchases to drive down prices and working conditions.

There just might be some hope on the horizon for Europe's agricultural workers. Through the Fair Food Program, farm workers here in America have set a path out of the antiquated, exploitative agricultural industry of the 20th century (and 19th century, and 18th century, for that matter) and now have proof of concept that with the right mechanisms – harnessing worker leadership and the transformative power of the market – change is in fact possible. The agricultural industry of the 21st century – from sea to shining sea – does not have to be rooted in sexual abuse, abject poverty, or modern day slavery.⁴ The Fair Food program is one of the world's bright spots, and is one of the most important models today for promoting workers rights and dignity since the birth of the union movement. This program, as a model, has the potential to spark a 21st-century human right's revolution. No matter the industry, no matter the marketplace, God is still speaking. God is continuing to put an end to our ills and distress. Thank God, fresh starts are still being created here in our living. Amen.

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⁴ <https://ciw-online.org/blog/2019/06/italy-spain-fair-food/>