

What kind of tree are you?

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: Amos 8:1-12, Psalm 52, Luke 10: 38-42

Amos 8.1-12

This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit. He said, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A basket of summer fruit.” Then the Lord said to me, The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,” says the Lord God; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great [*that is, give smaller measure for a higher price*], and practice deceit with false scales, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day. The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or 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, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.

RESPONSIVE READING

Psalm 52 (*adapted*)

Why do you proud people boast of decisions that hurt the poor?

Do you spend your days and nights plotting exploitation?

Lies fall from your mouth more easily than truth;

you love wealth more than equity, and slander more than plain speech.

Justice will prevail in the end, but the greedy will be cut off from love;

those who live in truth will know the joy of God’s nurturing care,

but those who trust in their possessions will be uprooted from their place,

while the righteous watch and note the consequences of evil.

As for me, I am like a green olive tree in the garden of my God;

I trust in God’s enduring goodness.

I give thanks eternally for what you have done for me;

In the midst of the faithful, I will pray and praise your name.

GOSPEL READING

Luke 10.38-42

Jesus and his disciples are still headed toward Jerusalem. He has just told the inquisitive lawyer that receiving eternal life means more than obeying laws but involves caring for those we might not want as neighbors. Today we get a taste of a different sort of hospitality.

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."



Here's a thought puzzle for you: "Liberation from the bondage of the soil is no freedom for the tree." Think about that. It's a quote from Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore.

I'm sure you've figured out I'm having a lifelong love affair with trees. I talk about them a lot. So does the Bible, so I don't apologize. The psalm says, "I am like a green olive tree in the garden of my God." I first fell in love with olive trees here in Minnesota, at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, on a high school trip. I was mesmerized by Van Gogh's masterpiece there. Ten years later, I walked into the painting in real life on the island of Crete. That teenage epiphany was just a whisper, a whiff of that immersion. I learned a lot about olive trees there! They live for a long, long time - centuries. Some of the trees in my village were a thousand years old, but still green and fruitful. Trees were passed down in families; wealth was measured by trees. Instead of saying, "He's got a six-figure salary," they would count the trees. The richest man in the village owned 600 olive trees, scattered in groves across the face of the mountain. I picked olives from nets and off the ground on my hands and knees; I learned five different ways of preparing olives for eating. One involved smashing them between two rocks. Sick people and sick sheep are both dosed with olive oil. Olive oil was their only cash crop - and they burned it in lamps made of small saucers with a scrap of rag for a wick when they ran out of kerosene. Olives were everything there. I mention it because olive trees were just as important in Jesus' time.



Can you see why I got excited when I read in the psalm, "I am like a green olive tree in the garden of my God?" I don't know that I would be an olive tree. I don't think I want to live quite

that long. Maybe an apple tree, like the Zestar! just planted in our own garden here. I hope it's still bearing fruit when I'm dust and ashes. What kind of tree would you want to be?

Crabby old Amos, the prophet we met last week, this week has a vision about fruit: God shows him a basket of summer fruit. Fruit implies orchards and vineyards, carefully tended until they reach their peak of production, as God has tended the people of Israel and made them prosperous. But once again their destruction is predicted. Why? Once again God tells them why: you trample on the needy and bring the poor to ruin. You plot how to grow your profit, by selling less product for more money. Sound familiar? Maybe the reasons for inflation were just as complicated then as they are now; the effect was just as devastating.



The wealthy may grumble at the gas pump, but they can ride out the crisis. Those on the margin have to choose between fuel to get to work, and food, and rent. Forget luxuries like medical care. Amos blasted those who took advantage of shortages to overcharge: it's called price gouging. It's true what they say: there's really no such thing as original sin. God frowns on people who exploit people.

I read a book this week about Afghanistan after the Soviets pulled out in the late '80s.¹ In this first Taliban takeover, girls are forbidden to go to school, women can't step outside without a man and complete body covering. When the Taliban imprison 11-year-old Parvana's father for no reason, she has to disguise herself as a boy to go out and work to support the women and younger children in her family. Kabul is a city of rubble. Then circumstances force Parvana next to make a long lonely journey across the devastated land. She gets sick from eating grass, the paper pages of a book, and drinking contaminated water. She befriends others: a boy who lost his leg to a landmine, a starving baby. When they find any food in the bombed and abandoned villages, they pick every grain of rice out of the dirt. Starvation is an agonizing daily threat. Sadly, more than 8 million Afghans face that horror right now. War starves people.



A particularly wrenching moment is when the children come across a burned orchard. "Parvana didn't like it in the orchard. She kept thinking she saw things moving among the silent black trees. She wondered what sort of trees they had been? Peach? Apricot? Cherry. There were no birds singing. That's why it was so quiet...It was a place of death." I was grieved to hear on the news yesterday of wildfires in Crete,

sweeping through ancient olive groves. Our country, compared to much of the world, boasts an abundance of food, yet many still suffer from food scarcity. Consider that redwoods and sequoias

¹ Deborah Ellis, *The Breadwinner Trilogy* - thanks to my sister Wendy, who gave this book to me.

that previously were impervious to wildfires are now succumbing to them as fires burn hotter and more often, destroying forests and farmland in our most fertile state. Children, can you say “famine”?

Amos, though, ends not with the tragedy of food shortage: “Not a famine of bread, or 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, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.” Somehow, this prophecy seems even more chilling than the destruction of the nation.

So let’s turn to the gospel. Jesus was invited to a private home for dinner. This home was unusual in that it was owned by a woman: Martha. While Mary sat at the foot of Jesus, drinking in his words, Martha ran “to and fro,” busy and distracted. I don’t think the Bible is telling us “Mary good, Martha bad.” Quite the opposite. We all could be inviting Jesus, the living Word, into our homes as Martha did. We all could be listening, like Mary. So this is like trees: how? Trees feed and fruit at the same time; they take sustenance, and they give it.



Olive trees, apple trees, fruit trees of any sort. The Norway spruce in God’s garden here. All of them bear fruit in their season. And all of them are rooted in the soil that feeds them, constantly. They don’t stop growing in order to make pine cones. They don’t stop making apples to pull nutrients out of the earth. Trees can feed and fruit at the same time. Citrus trees have buds and flowers and fruit at the same time. Trees connect to earth and sky. They know God both ways. What kind of tree would you like to be?

Remember the puzzle, “Liberation from the bondage of the soil is not freedom for the tree.” The same poet said,

I asked the tree, ‘Tell me about God.’
Then it blossomed.

For human beings, liberation from our spiritual source is not freedom. Paul reminds us that we need to be “rooted and grounded in love.” I’m not saying it needs to be church, but I am saying we need to stop and sink our roots deep into God. Ask a tree how to be both Martha and Mary. Yes, some of us are a little more of one than the other, but we need both. I invite all of you to join me in the weeks and months to come in an adventure in *freedom*, an adventure in the freedom of connection. I invite you to join me in times of prayer that will feed us as we seek to discern our future as a congregation, as we discern our place: an orchard planted by God right here in northwest Rochester. Look for it. And join me now in three minutes of silent prayer:

Inhale: Grounded. Exhale: in God.

Prayers

For the beauty of the earth, God, we give thanks today, for green grass and bright gardens, for flourishing fields, and fruit forming on tomato vines, and in orchards. We lament the destruction of so much of earth's fertility by war, and wildfires due to climate change; and we pray for wisdom to combat the effects that injure poor and marginalized people so very deeply. We

We pray for wisdom in governments around the world. We would ask that you end your children's warring madness, but we know that only we can stop our own self-destruction. Give us the will and the courage to do so.

As covid risk rises and falls here and in other parts of the world, we pray for global unanimity in combating this threat to the well-being of humanity. We remember those who lack access not just to vaccines and modern medical care but to the basic necessities of life: food, shelter, clothing, baby formula.

As we gather in worship, we remember those dear to us who are not with us today for whatever reason. And now, we pray not exactly as Jesus taught his disciples, but in words for our own time:

Beloved, Center and Source of our living,
whose presence is heaven, your holy love fills Creation.
May your delight be fulfilled and your Realm unfold among us,
the visible world blossoming out of the unseen.

We turn to you alone for our sustenance, the bread of life each day.
Set us free from our failings, as we set free all who have failed us.
Lead us beyond our desires and save us from the grip of evil.
For the world is within you; all power is from you, and all glory is about you in eternity,
which is the present moment. Amen.

Alternative Lord's Prayer thanks to Steve Garnaas-Holmes, unfoldinglight.net