

## **What a Disaster!**

### **Amos 7:7-15**

<sup>7</sup>This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup>And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,

"Behold, I am setting a plumb line  
in the midst of my people Israel;  
I will never again pass by them;  
<sup>9</sup>the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,  
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,  
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

<sup>10</sup> Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. <sup>11</sup>For thus Amos has said,

"Jeroboam shall die by the sword,  
and Israel must go into exile  
away from his land."

<sup>12</sup>And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, <sup>13</sup>but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

<sup>14</sup>Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, "I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. <sup>15</sup>But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in your opinion what are some of the greatest human disasters in our nation's history? We might well argue about them but here are my top five. I will count backward. At number 5 are the events of September 11, 2001. This disaster rattled our sense of security and complacency, and changed our lives. It had an effect similar to the attack on Pearl Harbor. At number 4 is the San Francisco earthquake. Thousands of people died, a city lay in ruins, and people moved right back to await the next disaster. At number 3 is the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in April 1995. It warned us that terrorists do not need to originate overseas; we can find them in our midst. At number 2 is the events of January 6, 2021, the storming of the capital building. This demonstrates the polarization of our nation. I am certain that our enemies drool over our perceived collapse and self-destruction.

This finally leads to number 1, slavery and the Civil War. 156 years later we continue fighting the battles and trying to make peace with our history. However, there is a catastrophe that overwhelms and gives rise to all the others -- the eating of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. This may not be national but the first bite resulted in a disaster of biblical proportions. Every single relationship was altered, creation was subjected to death and decay, every human being became a sinner estranged from God, and all this led to an even greater disaster, the crucifixion of God's eternal Son.

Disasters have become a part of our human psyche. We are fascinated and horrified by them. As evidence I present *The Towering Inferno*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *Earthquake*, *Volcano*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and *Independence Day* among many. We don't want to be reminded that our lives could end in disaster, in Armageddon, but we can't help but looking.

However, behind the chaos there are lessons to be learned from both disasters and our text from Amos. In both cases, the events show us that well-meaning and sometimes not so well-meaning actions create problems that can grow beyond our ability to solve. We then must face the monstrous consequences of our actions. This is not a popular message, despite the multiple million-dollar profits of disaster movies and books. Our culture fears consequences, and in our litigious society we have done whatever we can to shift the blame and spread around the damages. We prefer recklessness without responsibility. We want to play, but not to pay. A year after 9/11 I heard the man in charge of the 9/11 disaster fund, Kenneth Feinberg, insisted the fund was necessary to avoid the monumental legal battles as people sued the World Trade Center, the builders, the architects, the airlines, the insurance companies and anyone else they thought they could get money for their pain and suffering. Somebody must pay! What a disaster!

Our Amos text for this morning brings disaster into our sanctuary, no need to go to the movies and pay \$18 for a ticket, \$10 for a bushel of popcorn, and \$5 for a half gallon of Coke or Pepsi. Now that's a disaster! If you are looking for disaster, mayhem, carnage, gloom, doom and death, then look no further than Amos and the "Day of the Lord."

However, before we continue with our disaster story, how about a little background? Roughly 931 B.C. the united kingdom of Israel under kings Saul, David, and Solomon split into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Solomon had become a little too smart in his own eyes and drifted away from the God who blessed him, made him brilliant, and preserved him. God wrested the kingdom from Solomon's son, Rehoboam, leaving him primarily with the tribe of Judah. There was a tax revolt and most of the tribes followed an enemy of Solomon by the name of Jeroboam. The kingdom split; what a disaster! Jeroboam established Samaria as his capital city and historic Bethel as a cultic center. He erected a golden calf in direct contradiction to Mosaic Law and informed his new nation the calf was its god. He hired his own priests, rejecting the Levites. The kingdom degenerated to the point in which Amos found it. The king at the time of Amos was Jeroboam II and his high priest was Amaziah.

In Amos, it is the Lord who roars. Fires devour nations, whirlwinds rage, battles erupt, earthquakes crumble cities and locusts devour the lands. People face hunger, famine and thirst from drought, then floods with mildew and rot, then blight, pestilence, death, regicide, exile and near genocide. Then there is...running, and screaming. Israel receives the worst of it.

The Lord says to Amos: "I'll send swarms of locusts against Israel," swarms so frightening that Amos cries, 'O Lord God, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small'" (vs. 2). And God relents, saying this shall not be.

God then decides a roaring inferno will sweep across the land, so intense that it shall turn the sea into vapor. Amos cries, "O Lord, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small" (v. 5). Again God relents, saying this shall not be.

But God has His limits. He cannot let kings or people thumb their noses at Him with impunity. I don't think God's feelings are hurt; He does not react out of vengeance. But He cannot watch His people slide into total, final, irredeemable disaster. God appears again saying to Amos, "What do you see?" Amos says, "I see a plumb line." God responds, "I'm setting this plumb line to see if the people measure up." In this comparison the wall represents Israel. Though the Lord originally set up Israel to be straight and true, the nation had become crooked and warped. It needed to be remeasured by the Lord's plumb line, since only then can things be set right. What's the verdict? The people, the nation do not measure up. God says, "So, I'll never visit them again, the high places of Isaac will be destroyed, the sanctuaries will be wastelands, and swords will come."

I installed a picket fence around our backyard in Orange Park, Florida. It kept our young children confined to a safe place where we could keep an eye on them. I set the posts in the ground using a carpenter's level. I dug a post hole, dropped in the post, packed in some sand, used the level to check the post, packing more sand, and on and on. However, over time the posts, and consequently the fence did not stay perfectly vertical. Winds blew, rain fell, sand shifted, and I didn't need a plumb line to determine the fence was no longer perfect. That fence represents us, buffeted by our sins and the sin in the world. We are blown, pushed, sifted and no longer straight.

Amos delivered the truth to God's people; God followed through on the consequences. Not one of them shall flee away and not one of them shall escape (9:1). What a disaster! Those nations – Israel, Judah, Damascus, Gaza, Edom, Tyre, Ammon, Moab – behaved heinously. They did their neighbors wrong, so they got their God-given lumps, their “comeuppance,” far worse than a Hollywood disaster movie.

Why then do we think we can act with impunity, that our actions don't have consequences? Amos reminds us that disaster lie around every corner. What do we expect if we turn our backs on God collectively as a nation? What do we expect if we do not protect the sanctity of the family? What do we expect if we do not hold all lives sacred-- given, nurtured and sustained by God? What do we expect if we throw out the Law and let every person "determine what is right in his own eyes?" What do we expect if we keep religion and faith out of the public discourse? What do we expect? God's consequences of course!

There is hope. When we repent, God promises restoration, but even then, we may need to pay the price of restitution. Sometimes we may feel like we go it alone, that all the land has turned away from God. Sometimes it may seem that we are spitting into the wind. Elijah felt like that. "For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away," cried Elijah (1 Kings 19:10). God replied, "[Even after the disaster]... I will leave 7000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" (vs. 18). So hang in there, even when it seems like you wage war for God by yourself; you are not alone. God is with you, and who knows how many others?

Most importantly, God sent His Son to rescue us from ultimate disaster, eternal death and separation from our gracious, loving, forgiving God. Amos concludes his prophecies with a word of hope. He points to the Messianic kingdom, God's restoration of all people. "In that day," [says God], "I will raise up the [tent] of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old... Behold, the days are coming... [when] I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them... I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them..." (Amos 9:13-15).

All this came to pass for the Israelites and for us through the salvific work of our Savior. He stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and declared, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

What a disaster we make of things! What a wonderful victory God gives us. We receive forgiveness. We experience redemption, restoration and return. No one wants to live on the edge of disaster but when we stumble, thank God there is grace and redemption for those who return to the Lord. Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

*Soli Dei Gloria!*