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Amos 8: 1-12 and Luke 10: 38-42

“When Bad News is Good News”



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This basketful of bad news is actually filled with the good news of God being fed up with the unjust, cruel ways of the world just as much as we are.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight for You are our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

These days are filled with bad news. Our pastor of almost 36 years next month is retiring. Our church begins the arduous process of looking for an interim pastor. Stress and anxiety abound as national tensions are at an all-time high. Protests result in the National Guard being deployed. Conspiracy theories gain more traction, support, and belief than the truth. Wars across the globe with no hope for peace in sight. Artificial intelligences is used to write college students' papers and create fake nude images. Government funding to important public programs such as National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting System is cut causing wider gaps of information, especially in rural areas such as deep East Texas.

Floods devastate entire communities and more rain comes; there seems to be no reprieve from the weather alerts and updates about the increasing body count or number of missing persons. Legislators pass laws that further disenfranchise some of the poorest people in our country while at the same time these laws overwhelmingly benefit the richest ones. Our leaders files involving high profile individuals no longer exist, but we need only go back far enough in the social media feeds and news reports to see where they once demanded this exact information be released to the American people. I take my youth group to the

border and see a mother and her three children living in a migrant shelter. She tells me how she was kidnapped for eight months, fed only once a day, and forced to use drugs. She is waifish and her children's eyes call out to me for help. I dare not say it can get no worse than Alligator Alcatraz for fear of testing the theory.

God asks Amos what he sees. Amos replies, very matter of fact, “A basket of summer fruit.” “A basket of ripe fruit;” some translations “a basket of figs.” The fruits were probably unlike our version of ripe, summer fruits, but whatever they were, that is all Amos contributes to this chapter. The rest of it is composed entirely of divine speech, meaning God's words that we credit to God, and it is all bad news. Apparently, the delivery of this bad news is based on a pun God makes in the vision. The Hebrew for ‘fruit’ in this passage is *qayits* קַיִץ and the word for ‘end’ is *qets* קֵץ. Interestingly enough, *qets* קֵץ does not just mean ‘end’ but can also mean ‘border.’

This word play is simple enough to understand: the basket of fresh fruit resembles the end destruction of God's people (v. 1). God is never going to pass them by again (v. 2). People will not sing songs anymore, they will be crying and screaming in public (v. 3). Dead bodies everywhere (v. 4). A harsh warning from God about “tramp[ing] on the needy... and bring[ing] ruin [to] the poor of the

land” (v. 4). In verse 5, the merchants are not only doing business on holy days and festivals (which is idolatry of money), we learn in verse 6 they are practicing economic abuse and slavery by “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals,” all while selling the “the sweepings of the wheat, that is, corn which had fallen to the ground, been trampled upon and mixed with straw and dirt” on tampered scales while there is already a literal famine happening, as noted extensively by God again, in chapter 4 of Amos.ⁱ

Verse 7 God makes an oath to “never forget any of their deeds.” Then an earthquake, then mourning in the land, and a dangerously flooded important river (v. 8). Verse 9, an eclipse. (v. 10) Feasts become funerals. Dirges are sung. Sackcloth clothing, shaved heads. It is as if the only child in a family has died. The worst news is yet to come in the final two verses of the selected text. Another famine is being sent, but this famine is different. God was so tired of the people’s bad behaviors that God goes rogue on them. A spiritual famine sets in, and God’s words are silent.

In this passage, God is angry about the mistreatment that abounds. God weeps for the ones who are being sold for silver and trade themselves in for a pair of sandals. God becomes frustrated with the rich, powerful, exploitative systems in place. The border, the end of God’s patience was the outright abuse of God’s good

creation. This basketful of bad news is actually filled with the good news of God being fed up with the unjust, cruel ways of the world just as much as we are.

We can trust a God who sees injustices and says, “No more!” We can take refuge in a God who sends us words of comfort for all times. We can lean into a God who turns us towards each other when the bad news hits. We need to flip the bad news and see the good news. We do this by getting prayed up and reading our Bibles more. Studying together. Forming intentional community. Then we start to see the good news in things like Pastor Kyle’s retirement. The exciting steps he and Jane are taking together as they plan their future and prepare for their first grandchild. Our church is in a pivotal phase of seeking the vision of who we want to be as the church moving forward. I find that to be very exciting!

National protests mean people care. Funding might be cut but individual donors are giving even harder because they believe public media matters enough to help keep it alive for everyone. Tragedy has a way of driving us closer, reaching out for each other, and helping one another. The Epstein files might just be enough that people start to see this is about protecting victims, children, and young adults, not as a political division, but of justice and truth. The legislators still work for us, and we have the power to remind them of that. Instead of falling into despair in Piedras Negras, I start a game of Hide-And-Seek in the temple and later call Lotería in the courtyard. The teenagers buy candy and freely share it. The

children's eyes illuminate with joy at the sight of bom boms y banderitas. As far as Alligator Alcatraz is concerned, the good news is that the church is called to be a witness. We can take actions against these places. Please do not believe there is nothing to be done. The bad news becomes goods news in how it brings us closer to God and then in how it brings us into unified action.

We heed the vision of Amos to keep God's words close to our hearts, so we sit and listen to Jesus. Mary's actions of spending time with God and God's words serve as the spiritual food to survive the famine. But we also need to be a Martha. Yes, today's Martha may not be the perfect example of discipleship but this is not the only story about her in the Bible. She serves Jesus; he stays with the three siblings in Bethany often. Martha is beloved by Jesus and not afraid to speak her mind to him. She is honored by her community as evidenced by her brother's funeral. She comes to Christ with her hard questions and her expressions of faith. She spends time with the Word too and often her actions, her words led to her spiritual growth.

God expects us to get up and work, when the time is right, when we too are fed up with the way things are. Because if God is making moves when things are going badly, we can bet God expects us to make moves too. This does not mean we take revenge into our own hands, rather it means we meditate on the Word, especially the words of Jesus, let them dwell in us, and then let those words shine

out into the world through our own actions and words. Luke 8:15 we “are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patient endurance,” so when famine comes, we do not hunger for God. When enough bad news builds up and we are pushed to our limits, God is fed up too and that is good news!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

¹ Hadjiev, Tchavdar S.. Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary, InterVarsity Press, 2020, 165.