**July 21, 2019**

**Amos 8:1-12**

Amos lived in a prosperous time for Israel, but the people were no more faithful to God than they were in more challenging times. They were selfish and sought their own desires. They didn’t take care of the poor. They worshipped idols and had a very shallow faith in YHWH. Ultimately, they ignored God’s word. They didn’t follow God’s commandments. They didn’t use scripture or their faith as God desired. Now, in retribution (as we read in verse 11), God promised to send a famine over Israel. Not a famine of literal food or water, but a famine of God’s word. Whereas God *had* freely given them God’s word to read and enjoy for generations (and they had willfully ignored it), now God planned to remove God’s word so that they would become hungry for it, but not find it.

Ten years ago this week I led a mission trip away from the comforts of home and into a rustic camp that immersed participants in the experiences of those living in poverty. Students didn’t just look and see; they experienced poverty and homelessness and hunger, spending each day as if they were someone in a particular neighborhood in a different city around the world. We built temporary housing for ourselves out of junked plywood, sufficient to keep ourselves dry for the week. We carried our drinking and bathing and cooking water from a pump about a mile away. It was a long, hot week that made a big impression on everyone – student and chaperone – as we realized how many things we took for granted that made our lives easier back home, and how hard people in poverty must work to just survive each day.

Through the week food was delivered by the camp directors which we prepared over open fires and in rustic kitchens. As different as it was from our normal diets, we had plenty of food to eat. Until Wednesday. On Wednesday there was only enough food for breakfast and lunch. People assumed that dinner supplies to be delivered later. No one gave much thought about supper because it had always been there. So everyone did their chores and went through the day, but as the day wore on, people’s started to ask questions. “What’s going on with dinner? Why isn’t there any food? … when will it come? … what will we eat?” The afternoon transformed into a waiting game. They waited… and waited… and waited… but nothing came. By 5 o’clock, the group understood that dinner was *not* coming. There was no food. There was no time to prepare anything or eat anything before dark. As this realization dawned on everyone, a confused silence settled over camp, followed by a sudden depression.

It had only been a few hours since lunch. We had eaten every meal on every day previous. No one had ever been hungry. No one was literally starving, but we still couldn’t help feeling a gradual panic. People stared at the empty cooking area. Students laid on the ground, seemingly listless from the lack of calories. There were occasional moans and sighs conveying a deep sense of suffering. Tell them to build their own shelter? Done. Tell them to trade valuables for supplies? Done. But take away their food??? We were at a loss for what to do. Apart from being hungry, our days’ schedule revolved around food preparation, eating, and clean up. Without a meal, we had no chores to occupy our time, no flavors wafting through the air of what would soon fill our bellies, no sounds of chopping or stirring or fire tending, no trips to the water pump. Without hints of the feast to come, life seemed empty.

I was sent to the leader’s office, who planned this famine. They were ready. That afternoon they had carefully scooped wasted food from the kitchen into giant, black plastic garbage bags, with which they sent me back to camp. That was supper. Garbage bags full of the end of a tray of lasagna, cake going stale, salad bar leftovers, some forks and spoons and napkins. All mixed together. All thrown into a black plastic bag. Supper became an experiment in foraging through garbage bags for the supper, as millions in the world do each day (even in our own country). (Now I’ll tell you what our students did not know: while the food *was* leftover from previous meals, none of it had ever been on someone’s plate. The camp directors prepared “clean” garbage for this group exercise.)

I returned to camp with these garbage bags in hand. I called everyone forward to tell them the plan. There was initial shock and disgust, but pretty quickly they grabbed the bags, dipped their hands into piles of mush, and crammed whatever would fit into their mouths. They acted like starving wild animals, blocking hands and arms that threatened their source of food. I’ve never seen anything like it. I kept thinking, “we are not *really* hungry,” yet all of our brains acted as though it had been days since we had food. Our minds constructed a famine much more severe than reality. But we had truly missed food and all of its gifts: food for nourishment. Food for structuring our day. Food with social interactions.

Food literally nourishes and sustains our body, but there are plenty of other things that feed us: cell phone service, air conditioning, electricity, and employment being among them. When a storm rolls through, the power goes out, and these things are unexpectedly taken away, we quickly realize how much we expect our refrigerator to stay cool, the bathroom light to work, and the fans to spin. So when we list those can’t-live-without things, do we also include faith and scripture? How many of us have had free access to God’s Word our entire lives? We can find a Bible, read a Bible, talk about the Bible any given day. Yet have we put this to use? Are we putting our faith into practice, moving our beliefs to actions?

Last week we read about the plumb line Amos saw in God’s hand and considered the intentions with which God has built Sweet Hollow. We wondered about whether we were following the straight line (or path) which God designed for us, or if we (like the Israelites) had been unfaithful and followed our own desires instead. When God built us, God gave us community to share and leaders to follow. And God gave us God’s word to learn and study. God didn’t just create us and set us free to live as we pleased; God built us for a specific purpose, with specific tools to help us. And as we consistently see in scripture, discipleship – *faith!* – takes more than just knowledge or belief. God doesn’t just want us to know and appreciate that God is our maker and Sovereign; God wants us to put these beliefs into action.

We are not being Church if we just come to worship for an hour and return to our lives unchanged; we must put God’s word (as read and proclaimed in worship) into action each and every day.

We are not being Church if we just feed ourselves or our families; we must reach beyond ourselves to help neighbors and strangers, citizens and aliens, the poor and needy, the meek and persecuted.

We are not being Church if we are only here for our own comfort and pleasure; we must open ourselves to God’s challenging word and justice-bringing, offering God a spirit of humility and gratitude instead of power or privilege.

God’s word was given to Sweet Hollow as it was to the faithful in Amos’s lifetime. But have we put it to use? Have we done anything with the gift of faith, or is it sitting lifeless and unnoticed on the shelf? Would we notice if our path strayed and we started following another (our own) way? Would we notice if our actions were self-serving instead of God-serving?

The confusion we’ve felt in past years suggests that our vision (of who we are and where we are going) is clouded. We don’t know if we can afford a full-time pastor or the upkeep of our property. We don’t know if we have enough people to serve as church officers or tackle the various programs and missions which define our ministry in the world. In some ways, our recent years of discernment have had us wandering from sea to sea, running to and fro seeking (but not finding) the Word of the Lord… Perhaps *this* is the time to stop running, to stop wandering, and sit down. Perhaps it is time for us to stop and listen to what God has to say. Perhaps this is a season for honesty and humility – to admit that we haven’t been faithful about living out God’s word, or admit that faith was something pretty we set on our heart’s shelf and watched collect dust. Perhaps *this* is the time to put our faith into action? To be more intentional about reading scripture and praying every day, attending worship, and listening for God’s voice to direct our paths so that our faith will not just be a pretty picture, but an active, living, breathing piece of God’s kingdom in the world.

Great athletes know that it isn’t enough just to want to be good; you have to practice. It isn’t enough just to brag that you are the best team; you have to work to make it so. Our Women’s National Soccer Team learned how to play soccer as little girls. They played on different teams. They won games and lost games. They were injured and recovered to get back out there and play again. They worked and sweat and bled and watched and ran and invested years of their lives putting their belief into action. They didn’t just want to be good; they made it so. They didn’t just talk about equality on the playing field; they proved it to be so. And because they did so faithfully, they achieved the success they knew to be possible.

Sweet Hollow has so many gifts. Through our history we have hosted many saints with great faith. Now it is our time – not *just* to take on the mantle of faith, but to put it to work. Turn our beliefs into action verbs. Let’s not just talk about being the church. Let’s not just dream of being the church. Let’s put in the work so that we can “win the prize for that which God has called us heavenward”. [[1]](#footnote-1) In the midst of our summer lull, my prayer is that we are readying ourselves for a momentous, *positively* exhausting year ahead. Prepare to do the work of following God together: loving, serving, giving, feeding, praying, teaching, helping, and leading others into the Kingdom. Amen.

1. Philippians 3:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)