

Sermon preached by The Rev. Danielle Thompson
The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
Sunday, July 17, 2016
Proper 11, Year C: Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Our impulse is to divide the world into two kinds of people, whatever those distinctions may be. You hear it all the time: “there are two kinds of people in the world ...” there are people who like the Beatles, and there are people who like the Rolling Stones. There are people who enjoy cottage cheese, and people who can’t be in the same room with it. There used to be Republicans and Democrats, but I’m not sure those labels are so helpful anymore. The “two kinds of people” game is one we often play with this well-loved story about Martha and her sister Mary, as though Scripture were offering us, in them, a study in personality types: there are two kinds of people in the world, be-ers (that would be Mary), and do-ers (that would be Martha). When Martha and Mary come up in conversation, lots of us self-identify with one or the other, and though we can recognize elements of both sisters in all our natures, it seems like most people sympathize with Martha, who just wants to get a head start on the dishes before everybody leaves the party and she’s got to rearrange the furniture all over again.

We aren’t the first people to distinguish between Marthas and Marys, of course—Jesus did it, blatantly, when he told Martha that she was distracted by many things, and that Mary had chosen the better part. In the realm of spirituality, Martha has long been associated with the active life, the realm of service and justice, and Mary with the contemplative life, the realm of prayer and meditation. And there are a lot of other ways the line gets drawn between these two when we go to break apart their story: Mary represents simple enjoyment where Martha represents complicated expectations. Mary represents self-care and wholeness where Martha represents self-abnegation and martyrdom. Mary represents Sabbath-keeping where Martha represents the drive of labor. The list goes on and on. These contrasts are compelling and instructive, and it’s worth looking at each one of them carefully. But I think in order to get to this place where we can talk, helpfully, about Martha and Mary as two types of people, or as figures who represent different ways of being in the world, we have to start somewhere else, with something a bit more elemental, something that is not necessarily endemic to your or my individual disposition, but which affects all of humanity, no matter who we are. As much as we may want to avoid it today, our reading from Hebrew Scripture, with its scene of total distraction and disorder, actually offers a place where we can begin to explore the deeper sense of Martha and Mary’s story.

We hear people say all the time, “I don’t watch the news anymore because it is so violent and so negative.” I’ve never heard anyone say, “I’ve given up listening to the prophet Amos because all he talks about is destruction and war and desolation.” Maybe that’s because, like Amos’s contemporaries, we’ve learned how to block out the prophets, whose hyperbolic-seeming visions we read many Sundays out of the year. Today Amos continues what he began last week, an account of the terrible things that will happen to the northern kingdom of Israel, the region where Jesus will eventually grow up, because of all of their offenses. The people have warred amongst their neighbors; they have wallowed in silly and dishonest luxuries. They’ve given up basic tenets of morality. And then there is the theme of justice in Amos—he is the prophet, after all, that Martin Luther King, Jr. quotes in his “Mountaintop” speech, where justice rolls down like waters. Justice is important for Amos because among the people’s worst violations is their exploitation of the poor, whom they “sell for a pair of sandals,” from whom they steal, whom they trample underfoot, whose gleanings—the bits of crops left at the edges of the field, which the poor have a right to take—they sell for extra profit.

How have things gotten this bad? How has Israel gone so far that the people are now like a basket of fruit about to over-ripen and spoil? There is one major violation the people have eased into, one thing at the root of the all the rot, and that is the people have not listened to, they have not attended to the Word of God. God's Word—the truth of God and the wisdom of God—has been present to the people in the Law; they have been recalled to it in the speech and performative actions of prophets like Amos. Most profoundly, they *know it* internally; they have in their bones what God's desire for them is: "The word is very near you," we read in the Pentateuch, "It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you might obey it." But the people have neglected the word of God; they have rejected the word of God; they have forgotten it. Even when they have been hungry and thirsty and under attack, during these times when they needed God the most, they haven't turned back to God's Word. They have been oblivious to the presence of God among them and they have forgotten that life depends not on pleasures and profit, not even on grain and water, but on receiving truth and wisdom from God as though it were air or light.

I think it goes without saying that this problem is not Amos's alone. All throughout the prophets of Hebrew Scripture the story is told of turning from God's Word, of forgetting it, of failing to hear and perceive the truth and the wisdom of God when it is in us, and everywhere around us. And in a small, innocuous-seeming way, it is *this* dynamic at work in Martha's petition to Jesus. Now, that sounds like a bit much, I'm sure, that Martha's distraction and irritation should have anything in common with the destruction and chaos of Amos's vision. Martha is undoubtedly a good person—she and her siblings are people that Jesus calls friends, people with whom he can relax and be happy. Plus, Martha isn't even aware of *making* a choice when she opts to do chores in lieu of sitting at Jesus' feet: who would have thought that she should join the men there? Who would have thought that her obligations would be suspended in this unprecedented way by the presence of the Teacher in her home? She's not a rabbi. She's not a student. She's a woman and a homemaker and there's a house full of people to pay attention to. There are *always* reasons to attend to something else. Always. There were reasons for people in Amos's time, just like there are for Martha, just like there are for me and for you.

Perhaps because of Martha's good heart, and Martha's friendship, and her conscientiousness, Jesus uses a gentle linguistic form when says to her, "Martha, Martha." But he does judge her, specifically how she neglects the Word of God by neglecting to be wholly present to *him*. And though her error may seem negligible next to the whole sum and scope of errors that Amos's people have committed, Martha's error is more poignant because of how completely God's word is present in the man standing right in front of her. A common question, when studying the Bible, is *what exactly do we mean when we talk about the Word of God?* Is it Scripture? Is it part of creation? Is it the prophets? And the answer is, yes—God uses every one of these things to impart truth and wisdom to us, but nowhere is God's Word, God's self-communication as total as it is in Christ, to the point that there is even no distinction in him between Word of God and some other identity. So whereas Amos, as a prophet, speaks the Word of God, Jesus *is* the word of God. Whereas Torah, the Law, teaches God's people how to live and about God's love, Jesus *is* life; Jesus *is* God's love. Jesus *is* Teacher. Whereas Jesus' followers will travel about the ancient world preaching God's word of grace and forgiveness, their ministry is only possible because grace and forgiveness had a physical body in the man named Jesus, who lived among them as God's truth and God's wisdom, in the flesh.

Again, Jesus admonishes Marth here. But he also has a good message for her. And likewise, though we've already lumped him in with the nightly news, Amos contains a word of hope. In fact, every prophet's message is a dialectic between judgment and mercy, between justice and compassion. Never does the Word of God speak into our lives without holding out to us the better part.

But we have to listen carefully to find it. For Amos, it is in the way he paints a picture of his people's desolation: *the sun will be darkened at noon. Their grief will be like mourning for an only son.* For us, these are Christological clues. These painful signs evoke the story of Jesus, and suddenly we realize, amid this litany of terror, that while God's people will experience terrible things in their own time, just as we still do when we neglect our common life, the consequences outlined here are the things that God has taken on himself. You can see Paul outlining this complex theology today in his letter to the Colossians: not only is Jesus' body the place where all of creation holds together; Jesus' body is the place where conflict and violence, suffering and pain, and yes, distraction and inattentiveness go to be transformed. It is where these things are spoken into a new creation ... by God's Word. And if Jesus *is* the Word of God—if, as we've said, his life and ministry communicate God to us completely—then, following the vision of Amos, Jesus is God's merciful response to a world that would otherwise experience, as the prophet predicts for us, a dearth of truth and wisdom, a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

And what does Jesus himself offer? What hopefulness does he lay before Martha and all of his followers in upholding Mary's choice as the better part? This is where it may be right to return to those dichotomies we outlined in the beginning, specifically this idea that Mary is identified with the contemplative way. If contemplation or contemplative practices are something you are familiar with, then you may know that the greatest truth that centering prayer, meditation, mindfulness, *lectio divina*, among other spiritual disciplines, have to share with us is this same, central teaching of Torah, that *the word is very near you*. It is in your mouth. It is in your heart. And for us, it is Jesus. It is God's truth, God's wisdom living in us. It is our Teacher, dwelling in our homes, in the seat of our souls, forming us continually. We may neglect him. We may reject him. All of us will forget him. But his presence here [in the heart] is objective, and his faithfulness is stronger than us. It is *our strength*. He can wait for us. And when we turn to him, when we remember him, he will be ready.

Practitioners of centering prayer tell us that when you begin to attend to the word of God in prayer—when you develop an awareness of God's presence within you, and you become accustomed to feeling it and returning to it throughout the day, you actually become conscious in your body of where the sacred dwells. You can almost sense it, they say, somewhere in the region of your solar plexus. That may sound wild, but if nothing else, it reminds us that the promise of the presence of God, of the Word's nearness to us, is as concrete and embodied as Jesus was—and is—for us.

And, it reminds us that as concrete, Mary's way, the better part, is no less active than Martha's part. In fact, it is the only *authentic* way into Martha's part. Only out of our awareness of God's presence can we approach service and hospitality, justice and peacemaking, or any other righteous action. These things follow naturally from God's word: they do not precede it, and they are not separate from it. Together, they are God's response, in us, against the world's distraction and despair and toward its healing.