

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 11, Year C (track one)

First Reading

Amos 8:1–12

This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, a basket of summer fruit. And 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 by them.  
The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,”  
declares the Lord GOD.

“So many dead bodies!”  
“They are thrown everywhere!”  
“Silence!”

Hear this, you who trample on the needy  
and bring the poor of the land to an end,  
saying, “When will the new moon be over,  
that we may sell grain?  
And the Sabbath,  
that we may offer wheat for sale,  
that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great  
and deal deceitfully with false balances,  
that we may buy the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals  
and sell the chaff 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 dwells in it,

and all of it rise like the Nile,  
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?”

“And on that day,” declares 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 every waist  
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.

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD,  
“when I will send a famine on the land—  
not a famine of bread, nor 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, to seek the word of the LORD,  
but they shall not find it. (ESV)

## Second Reading

### Colossians 1:15–28

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. (ESV)

#### Gospel Text

Luke 10:38–42

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (ESV)

#### Comments and Questions for Discussion

#### First Reading

For all their injustice, for all their pale lip-service to God's commands, He declares that there shall come a day of mourning.

“And on that day,” declares 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 every waist  
    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.”

You would think that the cause of this lamentation would be the impending Assyrian captivity, the beginning of the Diaspora, the emptying of the land of Israel of its people. But no. This is the thing that will cause everyone to wail.

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD,  
    “when I will send a famine on the land—  
not a famine of bread, nor 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, to seek the word of the LORD,  
    but they shall not find it.”

I think I see a lot of people around me running to and fro, not even knowing what they seek, famished for the words of the Lord.

Many of them carry Bibles, and still they are starving.

Where are the prophets who can speak the words we crave?

You know the ones I mean. The ones who speak and suddenly you feel hope where there was no hope. Direction when all the compasses are broken. Purpose when all seems pointless.

The last great prophet I can think of spoke of a Dream. He painted a picture on the National Mall and stirred the heart of a nation, and people cast off their lethargy, their apathy, their rage, and dared to hope for a future they could not themselves see.

Do you feel the stirring in your own heart at the remembrance? That is what the words of the Lord do. In the New Testament there is a distinction between the Word (*logos*) of the Lord and the word (*rhema*) of the Lord. These *rhema* words are the ones spoken by way of the Spirit to the children of God in the moment, for the moment. They are for the building up of the church and they have real power. They are prophecy.

We could use another prophet like Dr. King. Someone, anyone but more demagogues. But not many of us are called to speak the words of the Lord to a nation. What we need are prophets in the pulpit who can hear what God is saying and bring it forth in a way that speaks to our hunger for them, that doesn't just pacify us with platitudes but stirs us to rise up in peace and joy to bring in the Kingdom.

And it may be you. You may not be ordained to speak by the church, but if your heart is burning as you read this, you may be ordained to speak by the Spirit. If you are, find a counselor who can guide you and help you bring forth the words that have been given to you in a way that builds up and does not tear down. Too many truly inspired folk have gone off on their own and sown nothing but chaos. Scripture itself says that each word from the Lord is to be tested. If it is from the Lord, a way will be made to bring it to the church, to the world. Speak.

## Second Reading

This passage is so stirring that many students and scholars of the Bible have called it the Colossian "hymn." Some have even gone so far as to say that they think Paul is quoting a hymn of his day in the opening of his letter. That's really stretching things. There isn't any internal or external evidence that this was ever part of a pre-existing hymn.

But it is hymn-like. It rises to Christological heights unsurpassed anywhere in Scripture. At least, in my opinion.

But then, that's the thing, isn't it? When we contemplate Christ Jesus in all His glory, we want to sing, and the stuff that comes out of our mouths sounds like song, even if there isn't a clear melody. It's just what worship and the Presence of God does to us. It makes us poets. That's why, when you read the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, it's often laid out like verse. Because it is. It just happens to us as speakers when we get caught up in how beautiful and glorious God is.

So Paul is caught up here. And he writes this all out for the Colossians because he wants them to get caught up, too.

Why? Why put this at the opening of his letter? Why not at the end. It'd make a great conclusion. Send them off all fired up.

But no. It's at the beginning for a reason. After this "hymn" Paul goes on to write about several concerns that he has for the church in Colossae, and all of those concerns come after. Because worship comes first. Because filling our hearts and our minds with the image of the power and majesty of Jesus Christ is the foundation on which everything else is built. This is what it means to "behold the glory of the Lord" and be "changed, from glory to glory." (2 Cor. 3:18) Paul goes on to armor the church of Colossae against futile words and philosophies. He advises them on conduct, but all of the armor, all of the guidance rests on them being captured by Christ's glory. Without that foundation it all crumbles.

When's the last time your contemplation of Jesus made you cry out in something like song?

Gospel Text

"Mary has chosen the good portion."

I read that and I thought. "Wait, it says she chose the *better* portion!" So I went and read it in the Greek. No, it doesn't. It says the good portion. Why, oh why do translators have to try to make the text say something it doesn't? "Good" says something quite different from "better." "Better" belittles Martha's choice. It sets them up relative to one another, it compares. How unlike Jesus. So, while you'll hear Jesus say "better" on Sunday morning in the NRSV in many churches, remember that's not what He really said.

So what is this "good portion" then? Well, at the risk of being redundant, it's what I wrote about in the section above. Looking on Jesus as He reveals the Father. As He reveals the Father's glory. As he reveals His own glory.

Remember what Jesus said to Philip in John 14? "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." (I know I go back to that an awful lot, but it's *important!*) Jesus recognizes that Mary is seeing beyond Him to the Father. She is looking on that glory. That part isn't "better" than getting the dinner made

and the table set, but it's the foundation to it. It's the "good" soil in which the Kingdom's seeds will grow.

I'm quite out of things to say. It feels really superfluous to try to add anything more.