

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – Year C

**RCL Readings** – Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

**ACNA Readings** – Genesis 18:1-14; Psalm 15; Colossians 1:21-29; Luke 10:38-42

**Introduction.** This Sunday is the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost and well into ordinary time in the liturgical season. Ordinary time is a season to reflect on the ordinary things of life and the everyday challenges that help or hinder walking with the Lord. Today's readings are particularly pertinent in this regard.

**Common Theme.** Armchair activism, cancel culture as well as naming-and-shaming are all too prevalent in this era of social media. Slander and defamation have taken on new dimensions. Lawyers are growing their businesses defending reputations tarnished by throw-away or malicious comments online. Social workers and counsellors are worried about online bullying and verbal abuse and see a link between the rise in cyberbullying and attempted suicides among its victims. What is said out loud or posted online is symptomatic of what is in hearts. Words matter. The prophet Amos describes quite literally what the fruit of ignoring God's word looks like and its consequences. Psalm 52 personalises the matter and digs beneath the surface to link evil actions to harmful words and a deceitful tongue. Even Martha in the Gospel reading momentarily displays a sharp tongue in relation to her sister Mary. Yet it is Paul writing to the church in Colossi that offers us hope and a way out. All of life has been created and redeemed in Messiah Jesus. He is supreme in every way, even over the natural inclination of tongues to be sharp or do harm!

**Amos 8:1-12.** The prophet Amos had once been a shepherd (1:1), but God had another purpose for him during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793-753 BCE). The kingdom of Israel was experiencing a period of prosperity and influence. King Jeroboam II had expanded his territory further north into Aram (2 Kgs 14:23-29), which gave him control of some significant trade routes. But this affluence came at a terrible price.

Prosperity was limited to the wealthy and fed on the oppression of the poor. Amos was therefore sent by God to denounce the social and religious corruption and warn of God's judgement with his rallying cry being "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-ending stream" (5:24). What made his task even harder was that his home was in Tekoa (1:1), south of Jerusalem, on the edge of the Judean desert in the southern kingdom of Judah, but God used him as a prophet in the rival northern kingdom of Israel. Amos, therefore, was a shepherd from a rival kingdom who had gone up north to speak unpleasant truths to the king and kingdom of Israel at the height of their power. You can imagine how that was received!

Amos has a series of visions from God: first, a vision of locusts that will destroy precious crops (7:1-3); second, a vision of fire that utterly devours the land (7:4-6). In both instances Amos intercedes, pleading on behalf of Israel saying, "Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" (7:2, 5). God relents and says the visions will not come to pass. However, God goes on to show Amos a vision of a plumbline (7:8), which is something a builder uses to judge if a wall is perfectly vertical or not. It is a tool of judgement.

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Amos is given a final vision in today's reading. He is shown a basket of ripe fruit (8:1-2). Ripe fruit in a hot climate soon begins to rot and spoil, a warning that a ripe (prosperous) kingdom built on the abuse of the poor (8:4) would also go the same way (8:3). Amos describes in detail what the rot looked like in terms of a variety of corrupt practices (8:5-6). In addition, he warns of further cataclysmic events (8: 8-12). God threatens that a famine would come, not an actual famine, but a spiritual one – “a famine of hearing the words of the Lord” (8:11). The problem seems to be a universal one down throughout the ages, that when we begin to ignore God's word, what is right and true, we eventually become deaf to God's word and ambivalent to whether something is right or wrong.

**Psalm 52.** Psalm 52 is a good example of how a text can read differently in different translations of the Bible. See for yourself and look up Psalm 52:1 in different versions (e.g. NIV, NRSV, NKJV, NAB, TNLB). Emeritus Professor of Old Testament at the Northern Baptist Seminary, Dr. Claude Mariottini says, “The problem with translating Psalm 52:1 is that the Hebrew text is not very clear, and all English translations are attempts at clarifying the words of the psalmist for today's readers.” His rendition of this difficult verse is: “Why do you boast of evil, O mighty warrior? The steadfast love of God endures all the day.”

While the differently translated versions may appear confusing on the surface, their central message is not and is plain to read. Picking up on a similar spiritual message as Amos, Psalm 52 presents the contrast between someone who trusts in riches (and therefore seeks refuge in material things) and someone who trusts in God (and therefore seeks refuge in God's steadfast love). An arrogant rich person who takes pride in their wrongdoing is contrasted with a righteous person who flourishes like an olive tree in the house of God (52:8). The fruit of the arrogant is plain. They use their tongues to carry out destructive plans and they are as sharp as a razor (52:2). They love evil more than good and prefer lies to speaking the truth (52:3). Their words destroy and deceive (52:4).

Matters of the tongue are not to be trifled with. Scripture is filled with many other warnings. “Those who guard their lips preserve their lives, but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.” (Prov 13:3). James writes: “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (Jas 3:6) and also “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness” (Jas 3:9). In fact, read all of James chapter 3.

Having an evil tongue (*lashon hara* in Hebrew) is considered a very grave matter in both ancient and modern Judaism. It can take the form of slander (*motzei shem ra*), which ancient rabbis said called to mind and has parallels with the effects of *metzora* or leprosy. The symptoms are barely noticeable at first but over time the disease becomes more pronounced. Outright lying, but also implying negative things about a person, is also *lashon hara*. Important in our age of social media, naming-and-shaming (public humiliation) is therefore also considered *lashon hara*. *Lashon hara* is likened to the sin of murder. In *Bereshit Rabbah* 98:23 it says, “A slanderer stands in Damascus, but kills in

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Rome.” (For a brilliant and more in-depth discussion on *lashon hara*, read Lois Tverberg's book *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*.)

So whether in the days of Amos or the psalmist or today, there are those who lie to get ahead in life and slander others to make them fall behind. There are those who pursue wealth and riches no matter what the personal, societal or spiritual cost. C.S. Lewis in his “Reflections on the Psalms” wrote: “One almost hears the incessant whispering, tattling, lying, scolding, flattery, and circulation of rumours. No historical readjustments are here required, we are in the world we know. We even detect in that muttering and wheedling chorus voices which are familiar.” Despite all the negativity of Psalm 52, or perhaps because of it, we are invited to “trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever” (52:8) knowing that one day we will praise God in the presence of the saints (52:9).

**Colossians 1:15-28.** Some commentators think that this passage contains an early Christian hymn that Paul included in his letter to the church in Colossi. Others dispute this, saying it is unlikely that a hymn would start with the words “He is the image of the invisible God”. Yet others think Paul has “taken a leaf out of the book of the ancient prophets to counter the imperial imagination with radical and evocative poetry” (Walsh and Keesmaat, 2004). Probably most well-known is Tom Wright, who has poetically rendered the passage based on the different Hebrew meanings for ‘head’. Whether a statement, an early hymn or an evocative poem, Paul is exploiting some of these different meanings for ‘head’ saying that the Messiah Jesus is:

- the *firstborn* (1:15,18)
- *supreme* (1:17)
- the *head* (1:18)
- the *beginning* (1:18)

Wright also notes that the different sections balance each other out. The first section (“He is the image of the invisible God...the firstborn...”) is balanced by the later section (“He is the beginning...the first born...”) with the middle part looking back and forward at the same time. Wright thinks that these six verses (1:15-20) “are generally, and rightly, reckoned among the most important Christological passages in the New Testament.” Much more about this passage has been written and dissected by academics and preachers alike. Expounding doctrine can make for a dry sermon. Instead, notice where the arc of Paul's argument (that all of life has been created and redeemed in Jesus) leads. Our alienation from God, due to our evil behaviour (1: 21), can and has been dealt with, in and through the reconciling work of the Messiah Jesus (1:22), because he is supreme in every way (1:15-20). Paul lands this passage by saying he labours hard to present this Messianic mystery (1:26) to others (1:27). It is a struggle that he does not do in his own strength but in the Lord's (1:29).

**Luke 10:38-42.** Martha and Mary are sisters (10:39). The certain village they live in is not named in this passage but elsewhere is stated as Bethany (John 11:1). John also records that Mary poured perfume on Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair (John 11:2). In today's Gospel reading Mary sits at

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Jesus' feet listening to his teaching (Luke 10:39). Martha is busy with providing hospitality (10:40) and resents that Mary is not helping her (10:40).

It was customary for disciples to sit on the ground while their rabbi sat on low pillows or a chair. "To sit at the feet" of a rabbi was an idiom for being a disciple. Paul, for example, "learned at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3), which means he was a disciple of Gamaliel (who was the grandson of a great Jewish teacher, Hillel the Elder, who founded the influential school of Hillel). But the intention of any disciple was not simply to learn *from* their rabbi but to become like their rabbi, perhaps even becoming a rabbi themselves. Mary was assuming the posture and position of an aspiring teacher in the Jesus movement. This may appear more radical than it was at the time. Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg (2009) point out that there is evidence women were encouraged to sit in on advanced discussions in synagogues in the first century if they were able to. Some even contributed to rabbinic debates and their words are on record. On one occasion when Jesus is busy talking to a crowd, his mother and brothers try to get his attention by sending a message that they are waiting outside. Jesus points to his disciples and says "here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:46-50). So presumably the disciples he was pointing to were made up of both men and women. Many of Jesus' teachings were carefully and clearly crafted to speak to both men and women at the deepest level.

Martha, on the other hand, was exercising hospitality. Hospitality was crucial to travelling rabbis and their disciples. Jesus was dependent on the hospitality of a small circle of women who supported his ministry out of their own means as he travelled from town to town (Luke 8:1-3). Hospitality was highly prized in the ancient Middle East. Lois Tverberg (2012) takes it further and says that failing to extend hospitality to a guest would be quite a *faux pas*, a fail. Throughout the Gospels, hospitality is extended in homes, often by unnamed people, that allows for table fellowship to take place with Jesus that transformed lives, challenged hearts, and crossed boundaries. It was in the context of special Pesach hospitality that Jesus taught about the importance of service. He poses a question to his disciples: "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). It was the quiet service of someone behind the scenes who prepared a Pesach meal that enabled Jesus to take up the bread and the wine on the night he was betrayed and institute the Lord's Supper. It says in *Pirke Avot* 1:4, "Let your house be a meeting place for Torah scholars; you should become dusty in the dust of their feet; and you should imbibe their words thirstily." The only way to fulfil this if you were not a disciple would be to open your home and offer gracious hospitality. Hospitality was honoured and mattered.

Perhaps this goes to the heart of the Mary and Martha story. Not that Jesus was elevating one sister over the other, since both were pursuing significant ministries or that Jesus was affirming so-called "spiritual" work over "manual" work (this dualism is at odds with the rest of Scripture, although it is found in the church today). Like so many of Jesus' other encounters, it is not the actions that are the sole focus of the story but people's hearts. Martha comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (Luke 10:40). Something is slightly off in her approach. Yes, it is bold and elsewhere Jesus affirms bold approaches, so that's

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not the issue. It is that those who boldly sought out Jesus did so humbly. Martha's demand, her sharp tongue – "Tell her to help me!" – betrays something other than gracious hospitality and a humble attitude. Mary, in that regard, had chosen what is better and Jesus would not take that from her (10:42).

### **ACNA Readings**

**Genesis 18:1-14.** Following the covenant of circumcision between the Lord and Abram, who gets a name change to Abraham, the Lord visits the recovering patriarch at Mamre. Having undergone such a serious medical procedure at his mature age, it is no wonder we find Abraham recovering under oak trees. In Jewish exegesis, this account of the three visitors with Abraham is the proof text for including visiting the sick as one of the '*Gemilut Hasidim*' or 'acts of loving kindness'. The acts of loving kindness are actions performed by God himself that are considered obligations for anyone who seeks to imitate God or follow the Lord. The three visitors are called 'men' or *anashim* in Hebrew, but later in the next chapter they enter Sodom and are identified as angels. Meanwhile, the opening verse of this chapter literally states that the Lord (YHWH) appeared to Abraham. Thus if God takes the time to visit someone sick or in recovery, then how much more should we do so if we profess to follow him. Interestingly, in Matthew 25 the sheep and the goats are separated and judged according to the '*Gemilut Hasidim*' in which Jesus asks: who visited me while I was sick?

The Lord declares a word to Abraham that Sarah his wife will have a son. At their mature age, this seemed an impossibility and most commentators can excuse their disbelief and Sarah's spontaneous laugh. Our passage concludes with a profound question that we can encourage ourselves in so many situations: is anything too hard for the Lord? And the answer to that question is a resounding no! Nothing is too hard, so let's unburden ourselves and trust God at his word.

**Psalm 15.** This psalm is entitled simply a psalm of David. Unlike many of the other psalms of David, there is no historical context or event in the life of the king for this psalm. In this psalm, David ponders the character of a person who is in the presence of the Lord. One of the characteristics of such a person is he who speaks the truth from their heart, does not slander nor spread gossip and keeps oaths. From this, we see that words are powerful. David understands that the heart of a person and a righteous life is known by the way someone speaks. Jesus says the same thing in Matthew 12:34: from out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Words and the actions of our heart are intimately linked. A person who desires to be in God's presence should guard their tongue, honour their word and speak only the truth. See the discussion of having an evil tongue (*lashon hara* in Hebrew) in the notes on Psalm 52 above.

### **Further reading.**

Spangler, A. and Tverberg, L., *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewishness of Jesus Can Transform Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009)

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Tverberg, L., *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewish Words of Jesus Can Change your Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012)

Walsh, J.W. and Keesmaat, S.C., *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004)

Wright, N.T., *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: SPCK, 2002)

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