

Amos: Recognizing the End
Sermon 5-13-18
By Pastor Curtis Dehmey

Amos 8:1-6

This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. ²He 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 them by. ³The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,” says the Lord GOD; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!”

⁴Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

Message:

Do you remember those older movies where at the end of the movie they would declare, “The End” in big letters on the screen? I look back at that and I wonder, how could someone not know that it was the end of the movie? I mean most of those endings weren’t surprising or unforeseen. For the few of you who are my superhero geek friends, the most recent Marvel movie, “Avengers: Infinity War” the ending of the movie is different and doesn’t leave the viewer with the same type of closure as the movies who end with “The End.” It doesn’t wrap itself up neatly. When we look at these older movies with “The End” at the end of it, it’s usually obvious that the movie is ending. There are signs. The hero saves the damsel in distress and they fall in love. It warms our hearts. And they live happily ever after. Or someone makes a monumental scientific achievement that the main character struggled through most of the movie. And finally, by the end he or she achieves their goal. Or the conflict that occurred between two characters through most of the movie, they find peace and reconciliation at the end of the movie. The conflicts that started the movie, are resolved by the end of the movie. At the end of the movie, the background music becomes more pleasant and maybe even triumphant, the characters say their final words to one another that’s usually in a positive tone and the screen fades to black. We know that this is the end. It’s very clear. The words “The End” aren’t usually needed. But then there are other times where someone or something just needs to declare that this is the end. For some it will cause anxiety and denial because they didn’t see the end coming. For others,

it will be a no brainer, and may actually release them to move on to the next thing or give them a peace of mind. For others still, they may be met with incredible grief and despair.

In our passage, the Lord declares “The End.” In fact, in verse 2b it is the most extreme statement in all of the book of Amos. ““Then the LORD said to me, the end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. ³The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,’ says the Lord GOD; ‘the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!’” I imagine that these words grieve the Lord, but it’s the outcome that’s to come. It comes with great sadness, but the truth nonetheless. It’s interesting how our passage starts though. “This is what the Lord GOD showed me—a basket of summer fruit. ²He said, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’” There are multiple layers to these first few sentences. First, the context, Amos is at the New Moon festival as indicated in verse 5. According to gotquestions.org, “The New Moon festival marked the consecration to God of each new month in the year. New Moon festivals were marked by sacrifices, the blowing of trumpets over the sacrifices, the suspension of all labor and trade, and social or family feasts.” This was a ceremony that was meant to give thanks to God and to renew their hearts and minds. So when the Lord asks Amos, “What do you see?” He’s sharing, literally, what he sees before him. There’s a festival and there is a basket of summer fruit in front of him. He’s at a celebration, so there must be food. The fruit represents the bounty of the Israelite people. How blessed they are. And then the Lord tells Amos in so many words, “No. No. No. I mean what do you see for the future of Israel?” And that’s when Amos is given the word of “the End.” Another layer or interpretation of these first few sentences is that Amos wants to see fruitfulness for the future of Israel. Good things. But the Lord is saying, “You want these good things, but that’s not what you’re going to get. Let me tell you, truthfully, what is going to happen, Israel is going to end.” If I’m Amos, I’m thinking, “No. No. No. Lord. I know you threatened to punish them, but you can’t possibly mean that this is going to happen?” No one wants to deliver this message. They may be stoned to death for such a message.

And then the Lord outlines why this is the end of Israel. There are signs. Things get distorted. Things that were once meant to do good and create prosperity for all, are now distorted, abused and misused. “⁴Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?’” They are impatient and greedy. It’s like being in a worship service and you keep checking your watch anticipating when it’s going to be over so you can finally move on with your day. To the thing that excites you more than worshipping the Lord. So it’s then about the religious checklist than it is about

giving thanks to the Lord. The worship has been distorted. “We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, ⁶buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.” A sign of the end is when people have no care for the poor. Everything is about the bottom dollar. It doesn’t matter if the least of these get trampled on. It doesn’t matter if you put them out on the street or take advantage of them, all you care about is yourself and yours. These are signs of the end of Israel. They don’t care about the “least of these.”

I was recently reading an article by Carey Nieuwhof, a popular church writer and advisor, about indicators of dying institutions. I’ll share a few of them with you that resonated. This is in no particular order. One, there is “urgency about the wrong things.” There is urgency in the institution about the wrong things. One of the proposals coming to the Annual Conference floor for the Church of the Brethren this year is to change the ratio of delegates to congregational size. For instance, the ratio is currently one delegate to every 100 members or less per congregation. They are proposing that smaller churches should be allowed to bring two delegates to Annual Conference instead of one. And I’m thinking, really? This is what we’re concerned about? And deserves to be discussed at Annual Conference? Granted, out of 1000 congregations, roughly only 500 send delegates. But the assumption is, that smaller congregations want to send more delegates and exert the extra amount of dollars to do so. But again, THIS is what’s going to reverse the dying trend of the Church of the Brethren? Are you kidding me?!?! As one person once said to me, “This is like re-arranging the chairs on the Titanic.” This ship is sinking! Who cares about the chairs?!?! Who cares about more delegates?!?!

Another indicator of a dying institution is that “Decline has made you cautious.” I’ve talked about this many times. We become more concerned about preservation and survival than about moving forward into something risky and new. I’m proud of us right now. Providence Church could have decided to decline inviting Abundant Life to join us at Providence. We could have said, that with our investments, we’re going to keep this church going as is until each and every one of us has left or died. We could have chosen that safe and survival path. We would have survived for a long time without making any changes. But I’m proud that our decline hasn’t stopped us from taking the risk. From blessing another. That we can see a Kingdom vision. Something new, wonderful and Kingdom oriented could be birthed out of this risk. Without taking risk though, we definitely choose the path of death.

Another one from Carey Nieuwhof is that, “Your Affection For The Past Is Greater Than Your Excitement For The Future.” This one is very common in declining churches. Although, I can’t say that it is generally true here at

Providence. I'd say it's about 50/50. Some of us really want to move into the future into things that may be risky and exciting. Others of us, are still looking at our past for answers. I'd say that this statement is very true of our denomination. We spend more time lamenting what was, preserving what was, rather than moving into something new. Into the new thing that God is creating. And I get it, there were some really good times. It's hard to leave what we know and are comfortable with, to risk changing for something new and unknown. I get that it's hard. But we can't go back in time. And we can't just continue doing the same old stuff hoping that something magically changes.

Nieuwhof has 11 of these signs of dying institutions. I could name a few more, but in the interest of time, I think you get the idea. In the latest Star Wars movie, the beloved character, Luke Skywalker, says in the commercial for the movie, "It's time for the Jedi to end." I know when I first heard those words, I thought, "NO. It can't be true! The Jedi can't end." But just hearing those words, brings a little sting to the heart. I love watching these Star Wars movies with light saber battles and in the prequel movies, a whole armada of Jedi keeping the peace in the galaxy. If the Jedi end, then you've ruined Star Wars. They can't do that. My reaction though, is the same way some of us react when we hear something that has been long-standing is coming to end. Can you believe that Toys R' US is closing? I loved going to Toys R Us as a kid. I remember the jingle and all. And yet, a long-standing store in our commercial economy, is ending. Everything has a life cycle.

For those of you who don't know, I've been part of the leadership of the Spring-Ford Pastors Association for the past few years. Along with Bill Beck of Spring City Fellowship and Wayne Houck of Trinity Lighthouse Church. All three of us lead the Spring-Ford Pastors and also attend another Pastors group in Netzer. We've been trying for the past few years to bring more life to the Spring-Ford Pastors. We've beefed up our communication with the area pastors. Using Facebook and fancy emails. We've tried to get pastors to rally around joint outreach events. We've tried to steer away from business during our meetings and more focused on praying for one another. In a sense, we've done all the right things that experts might say lead organizations to revitalization. But for one reason or another, that hasn't happened. We haven't had Pastors all of a sudden come to our meetings. Even as we've reached out personally to pastors, it hasn't increased the make-up of the group. Meanwhile, the three of us leaders have experienced incredible life in attending the Netzer meetings. We come away inspired and our spirit is renewed. There's energy and a buzz within the group. It feels like the Spirit is moving there. It was interesting, us three leaders met the other month to discuss the future of the Spring-Ford Pastors. I went in thinking, "Where is this going? What are we trying to do?" And Bill point blankly lead

with, “I think God is calling us to end the Spring-Ford Pastors.” And when I heard those words, I felt relief in my spirit. Keeping the Spring-Ford Pastors going was feeling burdensome. Why try to duplicate what Netzer is doing so well? Why not end our group in favor of letting Netzer flourish? Maybe something new can be birthed because we made the decision to end the Spring-ford pastors. And it was interesting when we told the rest of the group, there was no opposition. There seemed to be oneness in moving in this direction. So, in June, it will be our last Spring-Ford Pastors Association meeting. It wasn’t easy coming to this ending. In fact, we did everything we could in the hope that we could revitalize the group. But for whatever reason, God didn’t have that in store for us.

This might sound strange, but I think sometimes if we can recognize and name the end it actually helps us. It’s hard to go there though. Because, it’s usually not a pleasant thought. But think about when you’ve had a loved one on the approach to death. The doctors are doing everything they can to keep this person living. They’re doing their job. But for all intents and purposes, it looks like your loved one is going to die. But no one wants to name the elephant in the room for fear of being the bad guy. And finally when someone has the courage to name that this person is going to die, the game changes. It becomes less about keeping this person alive at all costs. It becomes about having the best quality life until it is the end. You can cherish those last moments. Even say some final words that might bring healing and reconciliation. The burden or weight of medical decisions may be less after naming that death is the path. No one wants to see the end come, but it might be what’s in the best interest of all. The person dying gets to die with dignity and celebrate his or her life. The people around him or her gets to express all that they wish in an effort to bring closure to such a well-lived life. It may or may not feel happy, but it feels healthy. Every institution and every person has an expiration date. We don’t always know when that is. We can try to fight it. We can try to keep the heart beating without the quality of life. But we do eventually die and so do institutions.

One of the things that I love about Netzer, is that their whole philosophy stems from Isaiah 11:1, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” Netzer comes from the Hebrew phrase for “A shoot shall come out...” The Netzer slogan is, “Ancient Roots. New Growth.” So in other words, the organization believes that out of the things that are old, that something new can be birthed. “The stump of Jesse...” Jesse being the father of King David. Something new grew out of the old and ancient roots in King David. As institutions become old and they begin to die, I’m not saying “Forget them. They have no value.” Because the work of generations before us has value. Foundations have been created that it would be unwise to just throw out the window. Forsaking the work of previous generations. But we also can’t stay in

time capsule. As the world around us changes, the constant is Christ, but we may have to change how we deliver the message of Christ. We may have to be willing to let God create something new. But something new, can't be created, if we can't let old ways and old things end. It's hard to do so, I get it.

God declared to Amos and the Israelites that they were about to end. There were signs. And if they were going to survive, it wasn't going to be by their hand. Only by God's hand. And it was. Yet, it wasn't just for the life of the Israelites, but life for all of the nations. God's vision for His people went beyond the nation of Israel when He sent His son, Jesus Christ to us. While the death of Israel was a hard pill to swallow, it meant the blessing for many beyond Israel through Jesus Christ. As I've said many times before, death does not hold our Jesus back. Even in the face of death, we can proclaim the great deeds of power of our God. Remember that passage in Revelations a few months ago that I preached on, Revelations 12:11, "¹¹But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death." Providence Church, when we come before adversity and even death, we can testify that we have the blood of the lamb on our side. That God will still reign. That as we testify of our faith in Jesus Christ, that the life of Jesus will live on. Our God is bigger than Providence Church. Our God is bigger than the Church of the Brethren. Our God is bigger than the United States of America. Our God is bigger than planet earth. Even though things come to an end, it is not the end. Because the great "I AM" is in the work of bringing new life to those desolate places. To creating new growth out of ancient roots. Death is not the end for our Jesus. Because He is the resurrection and life. Even if we are ending. Even if we are at the end of our life cycle. Even if our expiration date is soon. God still wants to do great and mighty things through each and everyone of us. Death is not the end. Our Jesus is alive. Our Jesus is the life and the resurrection. We can testify to the life of Jesus Christ even in the face of our death! Even in the face of the end! Amen!