“A BASKET OF SUMMER FRUIT?”

July 19, 2020 + Amos 1:1, 5:21-24; 8:1-6; 9:11-15

Immanuel Presbyterian Church

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“At one time, poverty was a temporary condition, you were on a downward slope for a minute, but you could bounce back up. We can’t bounce back today, it’s permanent. We’re not going back to the factory and building cars and trucks like we once did.” (Claire, from Flint, MI)

“A job working at McDonald’s or the grocery store, doesn’t make enough for one person to live.” (Mashyla, from Westport, WA)

“We’re working a forty-hour work week – it’s still not enough! We’re living from paycheck to paycheck. Rent is $600 a month, then we’ve got a water bill, electricity. I do this for my kids and it hurts.” (Abdul, from Raleigh, NC)

“A lot of people don’t know that regional flight attendants make 45% less than those who work for the major carriers for doing the same job. Although we are “aviators’ first responders” and one job should be enough, thousands of us work at or below the poverty line and we are forced to find additional jobs to pay our bills and make ends meet.” (Keturah, from Philadelphia, PA)[[1]](#footnote-1)

These are just four of the prophetic voices that 2.3 million Americans heard, during the recent 3-hour long “Poor People’s Campaign and Virtual Moral March on Washington.” I was invited and encouraged to participate, and to “virtually march,” as a commissioner to the Presbyterian Church’s first-ever Virtual General Assembly which started, online, just one day before the June 20th, March on Washington. The event included speakers and preachers, and music and marching – opened by the Rev. Dr. Bernice King, the youngest daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., the founder of the Poor People’s Campaign in the mid-sixties – as *she* echoed *his* words calling for the “fierce urgency of now” to address the big issues of poverty and race, “that this is not the time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism, but that instead, now is the time to make real the promises of this democracy.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

For me and I suspect and for many others, that virtual moral march on Washington with the Poor People’s Campaign *was a time* that was eye-opening and even life transforming. I would liken it to the experience some of us described to one another with the words of Debby Irving, a few years ago when we read her book together with Presbyterians from across the Church: “Waking Up White: And Finding Myself In The Story of Race,” that until participating in this march “I really didn’t know what I didn’t know” about the lives of the poor *and people of low wealth* in our country and community.

Although there were some other big names like Danny Glover and Jane Fonda who spoke, the bulk of the speakers who told their stories were ordinary Americans who shared their experiences of encountering poverty.

Some of the things that “I didn’t know that I didn’t know” include:

The fact that these people and their stories were as ordinary as they actually are:

That in 2018, there were 140 million poor or low wealth people in America, by some estimations, that is nearly half of the nation.

That in the richest country in the world, 700 people die everyday by causes related to their poverty.

And, that there are 60 million people who earn less than a living wage, $15 an hour, and that thousands of them are flight attendants – that is something that I did not know.

My teachers, *our teachers* on this subject, are the people who experience the reality of these statistics in their everyday lives, every day, the voices of Claire, Mashyla, Abdul and Keturah, called by the Poor Peoples Campaign, the prophets of our time. Noted 20th century Jewish scholar and teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel called prophets, “humans who sound an octave too high for our ears, they have experiences that defy our understanding, they are neither moralizing ports or singing saints, but assaulters of the mind. Their words often begin where our conscience ends.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

A prophet in his time, and a prophet for our time, today we’re also hearing from the prophet Amos. He was an interesting character, both a herder of animals and a tender of trees, perhaps even orchards. He was unique as a prophet from the southern kingdom of Israel who prophesied in the north. His name means “burden bearer,” pointing directly to the context of his time and the burdens he carried for the people of God whom he loved. Like much of our contemporary understanding of these ancient texts, we learn the most by exploring the context. And understanding that context helps us understand what the prophet might have been saying to his people and to us. Perhaps looking back for us today would be like someone in 2,000 years watching the video of the Poor People’s Campaign march and connecting the dots about our national context today, in the midst of a pandemic, in a country where so many people can’t afford to live safely and comfortably or to care for their children. And perhaps not so surprising to us, the human context of Amos is not that altogether different from our very own, certainly not through the lens of the poor. Theologians describe it as “a time of prosperity, with many people becoming very wealthy at the expense of the poor and disenfranchised.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Those very direct and seemingly uncompromising words from Amos about hating festivals and solemn assemblies were about what Amos might have described as “fake worship.” “The people of Israel maintained the pretense of worshiping God, but their worship was contrived and without substance,” because according to theologian Donald Griggs, “it had no effect on the way they lived or treated their fellow Jews,” particularly as Amos said “trampling on the needy and bringing ruin to the poor of the land.“

And this is where Amos’ basket of summer fruit analogy comes into play, a particularly timely illustration in my mind, as I’ve been looking at a bowl of fresh Georgia peaches on our kitchen table this week. For what God seems to be saying to Amos, this humble orchard tender is that, ancient Israel is like a basket of summer fruit, that if not tended properly, might overly ripen sitting on the table for too long. Or perhaps the behavior of the people Amos describes is like that summer fruit that looks good on the outside when it’s just at its peak, but it’s on its way to rotting on the inside. The warning for Israel, for us, might be to do something with the promise of that basket of summer fruit, to take advantage of its ripeness, what’s going well, and to do something that will make a difference for the good, to throw those deliciously ripe peaches into a cobbler, or into jam, or my latest summer favorite, into a bowl of vanilla ice cream. What Amos calls letting “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

What we do know in this time and place is that we could all use a little justice and righteousness, some of that ever-flowing stream to cool us off and cool us down, to comfort and console us. For as we heard last week from Isaiah, we know something of exile, too, while we muddle through two pandemics: COVID-19 and the reckoning we are experiencing for racial justice and black lives. For many of us are struggling in this time of anxiety and worry and fear as we are reminded regularly that the virus and its impacts on our culture know no boundaries, we are all affected. And the Black Lives Matter movement is forcing many of us to take a hard, uncomfortable, but important look at white privilege and white supremacy in our culture and organizations.

In Milwaukee, we have long known of the One of the things that Amos and the Poor People’s Campaign has helped me to learn and to realize in a much more profound way, is that I can’t rest in those cool waters for too long, because those who are already vulnerable due to their socio-economic background or the color of their skin, are being made that much more vulnerable during this time.affordable housing crisis that was highlighted in Matthew Desmond’s 2017 Pulitzer Prize winning book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City,* in fact, in *our* American city. This week a few Immanuel members joined an online Zoom meeting with members of the Habitat for Humanity Presbyterian Coalition to begin planning our Presbyterian build for later this summer. We were reminded at that meeting by the statistic that 1 in 3 families in Milwaukee pay more than half of their income on rent and with the effects of the pandemic, we were told that number is likely going up. The recently ended moratorium on evictions in Wisconsin due to the pandemic has been featured in several local news stories in the last few weeks, including a Journal-Sentinel article reporting a 40% spike in evictions since the moratorium ended on June 15.[[5]](#footnote-5) On Thursday, I received an email through Common Ground for a request for emergency volunteers for our longtime Immanuel Alternative Christmas Market partner Community Advocates. They are looking for volunteers to help start making phone calls immediately to people who have requested emergency housing and rent assistance.

So, what can we do? How can we be prophetic in this unusual time and place in our lives together?

First, we can keep listening. We can keep listening for the things that we didn’t know that we didn’t know. We can listen to the voice of the prophets both 3000 years ago and in our own time, the voices of the peoples long silenced. To learn more about the Poor People’s Campaign, to read their platform: A Moral Policy Agenda to Heal America, or to watch a video of the June 20th Virtual Moral March on Washington, go to June2020.org, that’s June2020.org . . . read, listen, and learn more. Just this week, our denomination’s national office of Compassion, Peace and Justice commended the platform of the Poor People’s Campaign, stating that it mirrors Presbyterian policy and that “if people are still looking for some concrete steps to do the work of our Matthew 25 initiative to fight structural racism and systemic poverty, the principles of this platform are universally applicable, *wherever you are in the country,”* said the Rev. Denise Anderson, “if you want to go beyond the Bible studies and book studies, here you go.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Secondly, we can speak up, and risk speaking out in a direct and uncompromising voice, like Amos, for justice and righteousness for the ones who aren’t being heard by those at the top who have the power to make policy that affects the lives of so many more. The Poor People’s Campaign, is challenging me to also consider what it might be like to get out of the way and to follow the lead of those we don’t often follow, to really listen to the Claires, the Mashylas, the Abduls and the Katurahs, to not only share their stories but to make space for them to tell their story and to inspire others to change and transform. Those who have privilege would be wise to balance our speaking up for, with pointing to the stories of those around us.

And, finally we can act up, we can put our faith into action, to follow the lead of people like Congressman John Lewis remembered this weekend as a fierce and stalwart advocate for justice and righteousness who was indeed a prophet of his time, embodying the golden rule of our life and faith, “to love one another as we would love ourselves.” Perhaps you’ll consider what it might be like to swing a hammer for Habitat or to make some phone calls for Community Advocates (if you’d like to do that, let me know, I’d be happy to pass along the information). Or maybe you’re ready to march both virtually or literally with our poor and low wealth neighbors in our country and community. The Wisconsin Poor People’s Campaign is growing as they plan to participate tomorrow in a national action to highlight the economic plight of local service industry workers. Again, learn more at June2020.org. So, perhaps it’s time to get your proverbial jam jars and your cobbler recipes out, don’t let the summer fruit in your basket, turn. Listen, speak out, and get active . . .

And, finally, as the prophet and the poet call: “Let streams of living justice flow down upon the earth, give freedom’s light to captives; let all the poor have worth. The hungry’s hands are pleading; the workers claim their rights, the mourners long for laughter, the blinded seek for sight. For healing of the nations, for peace that will not end. For love that makes us lovers, God grant us peace to mend. Weave our varied gifts together: knit our lives as they are spun, On your loom of life enroll us till the thread of life is run.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

May it be so, for you, and for me, and for all God’s people.

AMEN.

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**BENEDICTION**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the Love of God, and the

communion of the Holy Spirit

be with you all, wherever God finds you, now and forever.

Alleluia.

AMEN.

1. Quotes from video of Poor People’s Campaign, available at: [www.June2020.org](http://www.June2020.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Poor People’s Campaign, Moral March on Washington, accessed online at: [www.June2020.org](http://www.June2020.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Griggs, Donald, L. The Bible from Scratch: The Old Testament for Beginners, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2002, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/investigations/reports/2020/06/15/evictions-milwaukee-and-wisconsin-jump-over-40/3177897001/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *PC(USA) ministries supportive of Poor People’s Campaign*, 16 July 2020, [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Whitla, William. Streams of Living Justice, accessed at: <https://holytrinity.to/2010/09/hymn-streams-of-living-justice/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)