

“When Life Gives You Lemons”
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A couple of weeks ago on vacation, my family had the excitement of going to the Louvre in Paris. We stepped into history as we gazed upon statues and paintings through the centuries. Just 3 hours in the museum revealed many astounding treasures, and I’ve been told it takes at least 3 days to see the whole place. Even so, when we got to the room showing Leonardo daVinci’s *Mona Lisa*, while we were overwhelmed with the crowds– the line to see her up close was about 30 minutes long– we were underwhelmed by the tiny picture that rested behind bulletproof glass.

The glass did not stop a man a month earlier who had a statement to make. Sitting in a wheelchair and disguised in a dress, the man approached the painting: then he stood up, tried to smash the glass, and then smeared cake with frosting across the protective glass. He then shared a message: “There are people who are destroying the Earth ... All artists, think about the Earth. That’s why I did this. Think of the planet.”

Now, cake and the Mona Lisa have little in common, unless you think of the legend of Marie Antoinette’s comment, “Let them eat cake,” regarding the starving peasants of the French Revolution– a time when the French National Assembly declared that the Louvre should become a museum for the people rather than a palace for the aristocracy.

I’ve read that the man who smeared cake on the Mona Lisa– which wasn’t actually harmed due to the protective glass– was sent to a psychiatric hospital. It turns out that in this case, people paid more attention to the spectacle than the message he wanted to bear. It sounds like a lousy idea, to smear cake on the Mona Lisa, but the message he tried to bear is one we in fact need to hear: that **we** are destroying the earth. Last Friday, news came out that our Senate fails by a margin of -one- to have enough votes to support a package to combat climate change in the US. This won’t just affect our country; as Mohamed Adow of Power Shift Africa said from Nairobi, “it’s actually a blow for the whole world, for people on the front line of the climate crisis, and it’s a blow for the American people who will not escape the impacts of extreme heat, floods, sea level rise and storms.”¹ With the US as the world’s second largest producer of greenhouse gasses next to China, if we take a pass on doing the right thing for the earth, how many other countries will also decide that long-term sustainability is not worth the immediate sacrifice?

Even though feeding the Mona Lisa cake did not work in raising the right kind of attention, writers and artists have used symbols and imagery throughout time to shock people into receiving a message, and the bible is **no** exception. Ezekiel broke baked bread over human

¹ [Brady Dennis](#) and [Maxine Joselow](#) , “U.S. climate promises hang in the balance as Manchin upends talks” in *The Washington Post*. 15 July, 2022

waste— yes, poop. Isaiah walked around naked for three years, and Jeremiah smashed clay jars— each one using symbolic action to drive home a point about Israel’s relationship with God.

As for Amos, in our last week’s reading, we were shown a plumb line to compare how Israel is measuring up to God’s expectations. In this week’s scripture, Amos shares a vision of a bowl of summer fruit. Sounds pretty good, right? In Genesis, God blesses creation for a promising future, saying: “Be fruitful and multiply.” In Paul’s letters, the fruits of the Spirit are guidelines for Christian living. Amos himself was a shepherd and fig farmer, before drought dried the land and God called him to prophesy. But the basket of summer fruit Amos presents isn’t a blessing; rather, it’s a message of doom. Think of it as over-ripe fruit: pomegranates that have gone moldy and soft; plums that are weeping sticky juice; dates that are chewed away by pests. The whole bowl of fruit, swarming with fruit flies. The people are spoiled. They have made their faith a waste. In fact, the Hebrew word for “summer fruit” is **qets** and the word for “end” is **qayits**.

Amos is trying to tell Israel that, because of their unjust practices, they will lose their nation. And he lists the things they were doing: trampling the needy. Bringing ruin to the poor of the land. Changing the weights on the scales so they could charge more for a product than what it was worth. Enslaving the poor over a debt worth the mere price of a pair of sandals. The affluent would go through the motions of Sabbath prayer and high holy days, and then eagerly dive right back into their unjust practices. In other words, ***their worship and prayer didn’t change them.*** Their relationship with God, it didn’t change them. Sure enough, 40 years after Amos prophesied, Assyria captured and occupied Israel. Their **end** came, as if someone finally walked by that bowl of putrid fruit and tossed it into the compost bin.

Well, this prophecy is about as easy to swallow as a glass of pure lemon juice. It certainly isn’t the warm-fuzzy God we want to snuggle up to. The truth is, we see people who perpetuate injustice, who never get called to accountability. Not only that, they seem to thrive! And on the other hand, we know people who make a true and earnest effort to do what is good. To seek justice. People who love God, and are humble in trying to follow God’s ways— yet still, there are people like this who get cancer diagnoses, or lose a loved one to gun violence, or struggle with depression as a life-long passenger.

I wish it was as clear-cut as in the prophet Amos’ world: that if you as a people do wrong, then God will enact justice within the next 40 years. That’s it. Done. New Start. Okay, I don’t really wish that, because if it was true then there are many reasons this nation would probably be screwed, and I know I am complicit in some of those reasons.

The truth is, while sometimes bad things happen to good people without a sign or warning, and also without being a direct consequence of their bad or careless actions. But it’s also true that we are given some signs, all the time, that are warnings. They can be as simple as being cranky because we haven’t slept well, or as tragic as seeing a school massacre because we have been weak-footed about enacting serious gun control. In my family, we try to pay attention to signs; for example, after spending 2 weeks as just the three of us on vacation, plus another week quarantining once we were home, we saw the signs that someone needed some alone

time; I won't say who, but let's just say that that person took a long hike in the woods by herself, and came home a new person.

There is a sign that gives us hope that God IS, indeed, invested in our lives. Caring for us. Sometimes, even breaking through to offer a touch of salve in our broken lives and in our broken world. Maybe God is even in the *empty* bowl, after the overripe fruit is tossed out, offering a space to start again, maybe with fresh fruit this time.

Oil is a sign used throughout the bible for many things. It is a sign of soothing salve, a healing balm. It is a sign of recognition for kings. It is also used to prepare a body for burial. It is a sign of being provided for, in abundance— as we hear in Psalm 23, You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

Today, our Deacons invite any who feel called to receive a sign to mark their bodies to come forward...