

Sermon for Sunday, January 28, 1979, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GOD DOESN'T GIVE FOOD STAMPS"

I Samuel 3:1; Proverbs 29:18; Amos 8:11-24

Text: "Behold the days are coming," says 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." Amos 8:11

Over in the 14th chapter of St. Luke, Jesus tells an interesting parable. He tells about a great banquet given by a man who invited many. Yet, when the time came, those invited began to make excuses for why they couldn't come. Now, the thing that interests me about that parable is not so much the excuses of those who couldn't--or wouldn't--come. As a pastor I've heard so many of those excuses myself that they really don't interest me any more. No, the thing that catches my attention is the fact that the host has prepared a great feast, a great banquet! Now, obviously the host is God himself. Jesus is talking about what God has prepared for you and me and God is no cheapskate. God has prepared a mighty banquet in the halls of heaven. God doesn't skimp, God isn't chintzy. No, God prepares a feast. We won't be living off of food stamps in heaven because God's people are not on spiritual welfare.

However, if we reject God's banquet there is going to be a famine. There is going to be spiritual starvation. That's what our scripture for this morning tells us. It tells us that where there is no word of God, there is going to be a spiritual famine in the land.

There is a lot of emphasis today--and rightly so--on the poverty in the world. There is an incredible amount of hunger, including some right here in our own country and our own city. A lot is being done by the churches and by the government to meet these needs. The government has developed a number of programs to attempt to help the needy, such as Aid to Dependent Children, Food Stamps, and other such programs. In addition, our denomination has a "Halt Hunger" fund through which money is administered to meet needs. Our own congregation has made some special efforts recently to have a share in ministering to the needs of the poor right here in our own city.

But the fact is, there is a far more serious famine in America. It is a desperate spiritual famine. Amos writes, "Behold the days are coming", says 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." Yes, there is a famine in America of the words of the Lord. Many efforts have gone into creating this famine. Madalyn O'Hare has been active in creating this famine. Through her efforts in the courts, much of our spiritual heritage as Americans has been curtailed. The courts have ruled that prayer and Bible reading in the public schools is no longer legal. Just this past month, I believe in Iowa, an effort was made in the courts to get a ruling barring the singing of Christmas carols in the schools. In the churches, many ministers no longer have deep commitments to Scripture and the church has been bombarded by social gospel, by humanism, by syncretism, by universalism. The Bible for many is no longer the infallible word of God. For example, recently a Presbyterian minister was ordained in our sister denomination, the United Presbyterian church, who did not believe in the virgin birth, who did not believe in the divinity of Christ, and who did not believe in the resurrection. While the source of my information did not say, I would presume that the death of Jesus on the cross was not particularly significant for this person either, since how could it be if he was just another man?

Amos, whom I quoted a moment ago said there would be a famine for the hearing of the world of God and I believe that in far too many of our churches today there is such a famine. People are being spiritually starved and are suffering from spiritual

malnutrition. But Amos says something else. He says, "In that day the fair virgins and the young men shall faint for thirst." And there is such a thirst among the youth of America today. Many false prophets such as Mr. Moon, such as Jim Jones, such as the Children of God and many others, have risen up to claim the hearts and minds of many young people. They have a spiritual hunger, there is a thirst in their souls, and they are searching for that living water, for that bread of life. But because there is a famine in the land, they are being misled and misguided by false prophets.

But that is not all. Over in Proverbs 29:18 the Bible says, "Where there is no prophecy the people cast off restraint..." The word prophecy there means someone who speaks for God. It properly should be translated, "Where there is no one to speak for God, people cast off restraint." Is that happening in America? Recently I have been more and more appalled by the language used in the various forms of media, particularly in TV, movies, and stage performances. The other night our family went to see "Pippin" at the American Theatre. I was appalled at the language and the sex scenes, especially since I had my little nine year old daughter. I suppose the fact that we took her with us implied that we approved of the whole thing and I have worried ever since about its impact on her young mind. But the movies are even worse. Even the PG movies are so bad now I hesitate to take my family any more. Why must everything revolve around sex or dirty language? The fact is this nation is throwing off spiritual restraint.

Well, that is what the Bible says. The Bible says that where no one is speaking for God, the people cast off restraint. The other day I read a statement by Alexis Comte de Tocqueville, written over a hundred years ago. He wrote, "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile lands and boundless prairies, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great." I wonder what he would say today? No longer are our pulpits aflame with righteousness and no longer is America good. Can it be long before America ceases to be great?

How shall we respond to this famine in the land? How shall we respond as believers, as concerned Christians, to this dreadful famine in the lives of so many people? Some might feel that the problem is too big for one lone individual or one single congregation. But fortunately, God doesn't call us to do things too big for us. With his help and his Spirit there is nothing too big. God calls us to faithfulness. Success is God's business and faithfulness is our business. Our job is to be faithful right here in St. Louis and right here in Central Presbyterian. Let me suggest some things that you and I must do to be faithful to God.

First, we must begin to do the word of God. To make his move in our world, God needs for himself a faithful people, a righteous people. Let us commit ourselves to being that people. In our scripture this morning we read Proverbs 29:18. It states first, "Where there is no prophecy the people cast off restraint..." However, it goes on to add, "but blessed is he who keeps the law." Do you want your life to be blessed? Then do God's law! That's God promise. If we are a righteous people, God will bless us.

A lot of people today are unfulfilled. I discover men and women involving themselves in all sorts of things--sometimes sinful and shameful things--in a vain effort to be happy and to be fulfilled. But true fulfillment comes in committing one's self to the laws of God. Over in the Gospel of St. John, the 13th chapter

records the event when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. Jesus goes on to say that he has given us an example of how we should live. And then he adds this statement, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." On another occasion he said, "Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and keep it." (St. Luke 11:28) Again he said, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." Or, as the Book of James puts it, "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22)

Yes, what the world needs today are some holy lives to follow, some righteous examples to emulate. Our friends need to see a quality of life about us that is distinctive. God calls us this morning to be men and women who are obedient to the laws of God, a holy people.

But it isn't enough to do the word, God also calls upon us to say the word, to proclaim the word. In our reading from Amos, do you remember what the prophet wrote? He said, "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..." I believe that is happening today. People are searching for God, for a word from the Lord. People are hungry for some spiritual authority in their lives; they are starving for some spiritual food on which they can feed their souls. A recent book, written by a liberal minister, is entitled, "Why the Conservative Churches are Growing." And do you know what his conclusion was? He concluded that in an age of threat and insecurity, in a time when there is great uncertainty, men are looking for some authority to which they can anchor their lives, something to which they can give their commitment, something on which they can stand with assurance. And because the conservative churches are proclaiming the Bible as the Word of God, people are responding. And that, he concludes is why conservative churches are growing. Well, I think there is a great deal of truth to that. I know I need some spiritual authority for my own life. I need something I can plant my feet on, knowing that it will not fail me nor crumble under me. Do you need that in your life?

God's word says that we are all lost--there is none righteous, no not one. And men know that. Most people today know there is something missing in their lives. In this city of ours there are thousands upon thousands of men and women who are living lives of quiet desperation, who are seeking something to fill the void in their lives and give them fulfillment. Oh, how they need to know that God loves them and in Jesus has forgiven them. And Jesus commands us to go and tell, to go and share. We as a congregation must commit ourselves to sharing the word of God. Yes, how shall men hear unless someone goes and tells them.

Indeed, there is a great famine of hearing the word of the Lord. "Whom shall I send," cries the Lord, "and who will go for us." God grant that we as a congregation and we as individuals will respond, "Here am I, Lord, send me!"

Yes, we must do the word and we must say the word. Now, notice what happens when we do those two things. In I Samuel 3:11 we read, "And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision." So, when God's word is rare, there are few visions. (How we need a vision today.) But isn't the opposite of that also true? Where the word of God is abundant, there are many visions.

Do you want a vision from God--do you want a dream of how God can and will work through you and your church? I believe God is giving us a vision like that here at Central. For many years our church has tried to be faithful in doing the word and saying the word. And God is a promise-keeper. He is giving us a vision of ministry for him, he is giving a vision of how he can use a surrendered people who want to do his will. O, that excites my heart! What a thrill it is to be a part of God's vision for this city!

Someone said to me the other day, "Andy," he said, "God has blessed our church and our people have oversubscribed the largest budget in our history. Don't you think we ought to let up on them for a while?" Oh!, how can we let up? There are people perishing for lack of a Saviour. There are people who are starving, there is a famine in the land, there is an incredible hunger for the word of God. Dare we rest on our laurels, dare we lean on our shovels, dare we relax in the shade when men are perishing?

No, God is giving us a vision for this city. Across the land there are signs of a spiritual awakening, a spiritual renewal. Recently in Africa, Christians from all across the continent came together for a great training conference. As a matter of fact, our congregation gave \$7,000 to help make that meeting possible. One of the persons attending the conference was Mrs. Salome Mbevi from Kenya. "You know," she said, "God is giving us a vision for all Africa. I suddenly feel God really has something special to do in Africa through its Christians." Well, I share her vision not only for Africa, but for the world, for America, and especially for St. Louis. Our city will be a part of that great thing God is going to do. And He is calling us to take the lead in showing men the way of salvation. As the hymn puts it: "Come, labor on ..Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain...while all around him waves the golden grain? And to each servant does the Master say, "Go work today.", and then the hymn writer adds, "Come, labor on...No time for rest, till glows the western sky...till the long shadows o'er our pathway life...And a glad sound comes with the setting sun...Well done, well done!"

God's vision is no cheap thing, for God doesn't give his children food stamps. No, God is setting before us a glorious banquet, an abundant feast. He is giving us a mighty vision. I hope all of us will want to be a part of that vision, to share in the banquet of God.