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**SEEK AND LIVE**  
**AMOS 5:4- 15, MARK 4:35-41**  
**A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL**  
**ON SUNDAY, JUNE 20, 2021 BY THE REV. KATHRYN LESTER-BACON**

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Last year, amid everything else that was happening, movies were still being released. One of these was *The Sound of Metal*, starring actor Riz Ahmed. The film centers on Ruben, a heavy metal drummer and recovering addict, who discovers that he is losing his sense of hearing. I will be sharing spoilers about the film.

The film opens with a shot of Ruben at his drum set, in a darkened concert room. He sits, motionless, a spotlight full blaze upon him. He is tense, coiled, fingers gripping his drumsticks, eyes wide with waiting. We hear nothing but the tuning of an electric guitar.

Then sound starts to seep in, a trickle and then a flow, until the roar of a heavy metal concert hits us like a wave. Ruben comes to life, all his coiled energy unleashed in an onslaught of drumbeats. He locks eyes with his singer and partner, Lou. The two of them are tightly in sync, Lou, as she wails into a mic and Ruben, as the drumsticks almost leap out of his hand.

After that, the movie cuts to Lou and Ruben in their RV, sleepily waking up and carrying out the simple routines of their peripatetic touring life.

Ruben soon realizes that his hearing is disappearing, permanently. This revelation changes everything. He starts flailing, casting about, demanding solutions, demanding a plan. We see the fear in his partner's eyes and in his own.

Through fascinating use of sound editing, this film often puts us, the audience, into the midst of what Ruben is hearing, the way pitches change for him and sounds cut out. At times all we hear is a loud ringing. "I can't hear you, Lou!" Ruben shouts and we the audience cannot hear either. Watching this movie, hearing this movie, can be quite a disorienting experience at times. The sound is gone and we are left with Ruben, swimming in the silence and frustration, trying to make sense of it all.

Similarly our scriptural world of Amos can feel disorienting. The world has been turned upside down. The prophet paints a picture of desolation, where mighty rocks lie in a heap and life-giving streams of justice have become poisoned as wormwood. Hope seems to go nowhere. Those who plant vineyards will not harvest the fruit; those who build houses will not rest within their walls. This is the "curse of futility" through the prophet writings, a reminder that we do not own the future, no matter how much we try to control the present.

Amos very clearly tells us what NOT to do right now. Don't look to other places to save you. Pull your eyes back from Bethel. Do not enter into Gilgal. Do not cross over into Beer-sheba. Look at your own gate.

As Bruce pointed out a few weeks ago, we hear this motif through the prophets. While we might want to look far and wide for injustice, the prophets point us back to our own nation, our own worship place, our very hearts. These are places where, even now, we build idols, oppress others, and forsake the Lord.

A few weeks ago, Dr. Stephen Chapman of Duke Divinity School taught a Christian Education class looking at the minor prophets as a whole, in preparation for the summer series we are now in. Dr. Chapman pointed out that, while we can think of these books as series of individual books by singular prophets with unique characteristics, historically, people have read these books as a unified whole, connected under the title of "The Twelve Prophets" or "The Book of the Twelve." They have even appeared on a single scroll in archaeological finds.

Dr. Chapman highlighted that as early as 180 BCE others referred to “The Twelve Prophets,” saying “they comforted the people of Jacob and delivered them with a confident hope.” Dr. Chapman continued: “That tells us something about the way this collection was understood, which stands in significant contrast to a lot of modern readings. They tend to focus on the judgement in the prophet writings, rather than the comfort and hope. Still, this [comfort and hope] was an important way the prophets were read by those in the ancient world.”<sup>1</sup>

This surprised me and has stayed with me as I read these scriptures over the past couple weeks. It forced me to ask myself again, “Where is the comfort here? Where is the hope and the good news?”

In Amos, we are moving through a disorienting world, where the needy are in our gate and the powerful have no future. The Lord’s instructions are ignored and Amos shows us that we are out of our depth, drowning in the waters of our own poison.

This might feel familiar to us here in 2021. We too have had our world turned upside down. Even as we move into an increasingly post-pandemic life, we are still staring at the ruins of our sense of American exceptionalism, our institutional trust, our illusion of unconquerability. A virus has felled us.

No matter how hard we try to move on, our hearts, our very bodies still are remembering what we’ve been through.

As the world is opening back up, I hear friends, family, others saying “I want to be with people, but I just get so tired and overwhelmed.” They are surprised that, even when vaccinated, they don’t feel like rushing out to do every possible thing.

It is important to remember that we have not been resting for 15 months. We have been frozen, trapped in a state of stress. All of us. Yes, some of us have gone through this experience with layers of privilege and others with weights of oppression, but we all, in some way, have gone through something traumatic. We have been living like the disciples in our gospel passage today, tensed and coiled in the bottom of the boat, as an unexpected storm rages all around.

The disciples in this story are fishers. They are not stupid. They know how to read the weather and manage the boats. And yet, this storm takes them by surprise. Any illusions of safety or understandings of self-sufficiency are quickly washed overboard.

We too have been shocked by something we didn’t realize would be as big or last as long as it has. Early on we imagined how it would be when this ended, how we would all rush back together. It’s clear that we’ll come together more as a trickle than a flood.

Some theologians use the language of apocalypse, or as it translates, “unveiling,” to describe this time. Illusions are crumbling. Veils are getting stripped away. No matter how smart or powerful we might consider ourselves, we all have been tossed and turned on the seas of uncertainty, not knowing what the future would bring.

We are now in a time when the ground beneath our feet is shifting. Destruction has come upon the fortress. We have to relearn a whole new way of being. We cannot simply applaud our essential workers or thank our teachers or make a new federal holiday. We are needing to rebuild our society, our health care system, our classrooms, our social fabric, our hearts and minds and bodies.

I do not fully know how we will make meaning out of this pandemic, but I do think Amos has some hope for us. Despite all our bribes and towers, despite all the lies of grind culture, we have never been as powerful or in-control as we would like to believe. We are not omnipotent. This can give us comfort.

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<sup>1</sup> Class. June 6<sup>th</sup> 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vyhhXo-WgM>

Or I heard spiritual director put it this way: I have two pieces of good news for you. 1) there is a Savior of the world. 2) It is not you.<sup>2</sup>

In the deluge, we need to cling to this truth.

We are not God. We are not the Savior of the world. Instead, we must seek the Lord. Seek the Lord and live.

In Sound of Metal, Ruben, with the help of others, makes his way to a community for deaf people. There he meets Joe, one of the leaders, a veteran who lost his hearing in the Vietnam war and started drinking. In Ruben, Joe recognizes a fellow recovering addict. Joe firmly states that in this program, the job is not to try to fix people and their hearing. Ruben's job now is to "learn how to be deaf."

Ruben resists this, he shrugs this off. He bangs and barges around the community, twitching with energy and plans. Joe later sits him down, signing the whole time, as he does every time he talks: "Ruben, I've got an assignment for you... You wake up early, don't you? I'll have hot coffee waiting for you at 5:30, 5 am... I'll provide a room for you. And there's nothing that needs to be accomplished in this room. All I want you to do is just....sit."

Ruben scoffs. Joe continues, "All I ask is, if and when you cannot just sit, you turn yourself to the pen and paper that I'm going to supply for you. And I want you to...write. Doesn't matter what you write or how you write, or if it's spelled correctly. Or if it's a big.... mess. But I want you to keep writing continuously without stopping until you find you can... sit again... And if at some time in the future, it feels like it's a little bit too difficult for you, you should come and find me. I'll be in my apartment, doing the same thing as you, okay, Ruben? I'll be writing too."

Ruben is learning how to rebuild a world that has crumbled into pieces, where he is no longer in control.

Joe is teaching Ruben that he is not alone in the mess. That someone else is there, just down the hall, sitting on the dustheap.

Our scriptures are showing us the same thing: that the way through the turbulence of our time is not to pretend that we are just fine. We are not called to fix it all with a fun party or trip or new exercise routine. The strongest fortress has crumbled. Thousands who have been sent out will not be coming back.

We can no longer cling to the illusion that our gates are exceptional. Now is the time when we are called to sit and notice what we've lost—and what we've destroyed. Now is the time to grieve over the lost vineyards, to acknowledge our brutalized Creation, to tear our robes over the oppression of the needy.

We are not called to conquer the world. We are called to pay attention and seek God in the world, even as the dust is still clearing.

The disciples discover this as well. At the time of this story in the Mark gospel, Jesus' ministry is only just beginning. These disciples have only just begun to follow their new Teacher around the Galilean region. They've seen him draw crowds and do amazing things. They've watched him with excitement. But the disciples have not yet realized that this is not about local fame and power. Jesus is about something far more radical and transformative, far more terrifying...and comforting.

Jesus will not build them the biggest boat in which to ride out the storm. Jesus has joined them in the rising and falling of the swells. Jesus has joined them in the same boat in the midst of the same tumult. And the disciples discover that HERE is where the transformation begins.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/james-martin-finding-god-in-all-things-2/#transcript>

In the movie, we see Ruben slowly connect with people in the deaf community and start to find joy and purpose in work and relationships. And yet, despite everything he experiences, Ruben still makes a decision, a very costly decision, to try and fix his hearing. Afterwards, he goes to Joe and sits down, defensive and aggressive, once again. As Joe watches, Ruben, tense with emotion, signs and spits out: “I had to do something. I’m trying to save my life. No one else is going to save it for me. If I just sit here and diddle around, what am I going to have? Nothing. What does it matter? All this? What does it matter? It just passes...it’s okay. That’s life. It just passes, it just f-ing passes.”

Joe looks at all Ruben’s coiled defensiveness, and says: “I wonder, all these mornings you’ve been sitting in my study, sitting...have you...had any moments of...stillness? Because you’re right, Ruben, the world does keep moving and it can be a darn cruel place. But for me...those moments of stillness...that place? that’s the kingdom of God. And that place will never abandon you.”

The movie doesn’t end there, and I will let you watch the rest of the plot unfold for yourself. But I will say this: we are given a moment of hope. Near the end, we see Ruben sit on a city bench along a busy boulevard. Children are shouting, church bells are chiming, cars are rumbling. We see Ruben look at the children. We see him look at the birds. We see him look at the church bell tower. We hear the bells clang. And then, it all goes silent. Finally, we see it: a moment of stillness. Ruben is on a bench in the middle of a busy street. He looks at the sky and, at last, we see Ruben sit and be still.

“Seek me and live.”

Christ is in the gate with the poor. He is on the rubble heap with the ruined.

He is in the boat, tossed and tumbled. He is here with us now.

Seek him. Be still, seek, and live.

Amen.