I’m glad to be with you today while Fr. Philip is away for the College of Congregational Development training. It’s my first chance to publicly thank you all for all the ways you made our wedding so beautiful – the music, the flowers, the reception, your participation – it was a fabulous day for us because of your hard work. Thank you.

Now about those lessons… Amos has a beautiful basket of summer fruit, the psalmist seems to have read the New York Times, and Martha has a difficult conversation with Jesus. What do these lessons have in common?

It was great for me to have these lessons to think about because the news this last week was so maddening to hear. I tried not to listen or read who was saying what about whom and who was doing what to whom at our borders. And then I began to wonder if that wasn’t exactly what our lessons are about – to whom do we listen? And what motivates us to act? What are the activating forces in our lives?

It seems to me that our lessons from Amos and Luke are about big motivators in modern life – greed, fear, and anxiety.

Amos is shown a basket of summer fruit and then God tells Amos that the people are going to reap what they’ve been sowing. ‘Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "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, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat,”’ reads the charge against them.

The people of Israel have forgotten how they were supposed to treat each other – their greed has overtaken them. They’re cheating the poor – fixing the scales and selling what should have been offered for free (those sweepings of wheat were meant for the poor.) And their impatience with observances of the new moon and Sabbath reveals that they’re more concerned with their finances than with their spiritual lives. God warns them that they will reap what they are sowing. Their lack of attention to the voice of God and their immense concern for their own well-being at the expense of others means that they were losing their ability to hear the voice of God at all.

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”

Greed isn’t good. Greed is born from fear. When we are afraid that there will not be enough, we hold on tightly to what we have and work to get more. We might be telling ourselves that we’re just watching out, just taking care of ourselves and those we love. But when we’re motivated by fear and greed, we stop caring for the orphans and widows and the strangers to our country. We stop listening to the God who tells us to open our hands to share our bounty with those in need.
And if we disregard the voice of God long enough, we don’t even realize we can’t hear God any longer.

Until we find ourselves in trouble and need God’s help. And then we are lost. All that’s left is a basket of summer fruit.

Greed and fear can motivate us to act, but we run the risk of losing our hearing when we allow them to drive our lives.

In Luke’s gospel, Martha and Mary are entertaining Jesus and a group of disciples in their home. Martha is ‘distracted by her many tasks,’ Luke says. So she asks Jesus to tell Mary to give her a hand. Jesus refuses, saying that Martha is ‘worried and distracted by many things,’ but Mary has chosen to sit and listen and Jesus is okay with that.

This passage is four verses long – it is not a treatise of the role of women anywhere! Jesus is not saying that sitting in the pew is better than setting up for Coffee Hour. Nor is he saying there is anything wrong about doing the work that needs to be done. What I hear him saying is that Martha is motivated by her worry and distracted by what she thinks needs to get done. She’s anxious. And her anxiety is preventing her from joining in, preventing her from hearing what Jesus and the disciples are discussing. Martha wants Mary to change. Jesus seems to say that Martha is the one who needs changing. Only one thing is really necessary – listening.

Anxiety can be a great motivator – it can drive us to be the best we can be, to get things done, to succeed. We can be anxious about lots of things – about what people think about us, about what our parents want from us, what our children need from us. We can be anxious about the future – for ourselves, for our parishes, for our nation. We can be anxious about all the things we think we need to accomplish. We can be anxious about being anxious. Our anxiety can motivate us to do all sorts of things… all sorts of things that don’t necessarily need to be done…

What we need is the ability to stop and listen. To let go of all the other voices from inside us and outside us about what we need to do or to be. We need to stop and listen for the voice of God – the God that the prophet Elijah experienced in the sound of sheer silence. God does not yell. The Spirit whispers, nudges, quietly offers up what we need and ideas about how we can to live in love. We do not need to live in fear. We ought not be greedy. We do not need to be worried or distracted or anxious.

We can stop and let the love of God fill us up. We can listen for the Spirit’s voice to lead us beyond anxiety and fear into God’s bountiful presence.

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our needs before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.