

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Amos 7:7-15

This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. "The high places of Isaac will be destroyed, and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam." Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying: "'Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.'" Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom." Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

The Prophet, The Priest and The Plumb Line

Amos is perhaps the book best known, or best associated with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and his powerful oratory. Amos, chapter five "I hate I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." Though you offer burnt offerings, though you sing me songs, though you play your harps, I will not listen. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

The prophet lifts up a new way of thinking about justice. While we here in our country, or here in the western world think of justice as the image of a woman, blindfolded, holding a set of balances so that "justice" is a static concept, a noun, describing the achievement of fairness and equality and symbolizing a state of balance where all is at rest the image Amos calls to mind is totally different. (Interpretation, *Hosea-Micah*, James Limberg, p. 107) Justice is like a churning, surging, cleansing stream. There is motion and commotion. Elsewhere in the bible there is a "torrent" in the Kishon Valley, but we might think Niagara Falls, a prophetic picture of justice more like an onrushing torrent, than a balanced scale.

Another scriptural backdrop piece: Justice in the bible is not a philosophical thing, something to discuss in lecture halls or even dinner parties. Prophets like Amos take us on a tour of what is wrong with present day reality. As James Limburg says, "When the prophets speak of justice...They lead us through those quarters of the city where the poor live and they invite us to look into the hungry eyes of the lonely widow, the hurting orphan, the hungry beggar. Or they take us through the countryside and introduce us to the couple about to lose the family farm. Or we may

be led through a home for the aged, where a lonely hand reaches out to be touched.” (Limberg, p. 108-109) The prophets presuppose a brotherhood and sisterhood and a God that laments all that threatens the wellbeing of people.

A little more biblical background, as we move our way to this text today. First, it is about judgment. But it is not locusts, or fire, or any such threat that will destroy that which is not pleasing. Amos in his vision manages to convince God not to bring those judgments to bear. The vision that holds is a plumb line, something that is used to measure the straightness of a wall. It is Israel being measured, and Israel that doesn't measure up. Why? Because the needs of the vulnerable and powerless are being ignored by those in power.

Biblical scholars (who love to argue about many things) suggest that the proper translation of this scripture would not be “plumb line”...they suggest there may be a play on words going on here. The word Anek, for plumb line is similar to a word “anoki” for myself...and a form of you, “ennak”. God may be saying to Amos ‘See I have set *you* in the midst of the people’ *You* are to be the measure. *You* are to be the one telling the people they aren't walking in my ways, they have gone astray, they are crooked, leaning toward power and influence rather than towards love and justice.

And Amos ...well, he may have persuaded God not to destroy everyone, but he surely hasn't escaped the tension that comes with being a spokesperson for God. Amaziah steps in, Amaziah the priest. Now Amaziah...he speaks smooth words to the King. Everything is good. People are happy. People love you. They fear you too. All is well. And when it comes to Amos and the word of God he brings, Amaziah gives the King only a partial message. Amos is against you, Amos is conspiring against you in the place of the King's worship, at Bethel. Amaziah makes no mention of *why* Amos says God is upset. No message at all of the economic and social injustices Amos has been speaking of. No, Amos is portrayed as simply being a disloyal conspirator.

Amaziah, you see, wants to soothe the king. He doesn't want the king to worry himself about things like the “poverty issue”. Amos 'n Amaziah. Two different kinds of religion. Amos criticizes the kind of religion that makes a big fuss in the sanctuary, and then makes a dichotomy between faith and daily life. He says it makes God *nauseous, no let's make it even more graphic...it makes God want to barf* when there is no justice in the marketplace, no concern for justice in the courts and you blithely go on worshipping God in the sanctuary. Amaziah spares the king all that content. And he basically tells Amos to go back where he came from. See, what goes in Bethel, in the royal chapel, is keeping things orderly and tame. And this deep sense of propriety in religion...it keeps things the way they are.

You have to love Amos's response. Amos says, “Hey I am no prophet, nor one of the sons of the prophets.” He is a layperson who, as Richard noted in the introduction to scripture today, happened to tend sheep and look after sycamore trees for a living.

Now “sons of prophets” were groups of prophets who attached themselves to a particular master, individuals for whom prophecy had become a profession. The prophet Micah spoke of prophets who tailor their preaching to the size of their salaries (Micah 3:5) -- like Amaziah, King Jereboam’s man. Amos says, hey, I don’t have a vested interest here. I’d have been just as happy to stay with my sheep and my trees. But God pulled me away from that, and said go and speak, go and speak my word to the people.

Two different kinds of religion. Religion that soothes, placates, tells half truths, keeps things in order, in place. And religion that lifts up the word of God the love and justice of God, which is like that ever rolling stream. Remember Amos is not just an angry reformer. The prophet speaks because he or she has been spoken to. Out of a *call* and out of God’s love and concern the prophet puts himself in the middle of God and the people to say something’s amiss, and to call forth obedience to God’s ways. Amos’s words, heard right, will mean behavior will change. Amaziah’s words will keep things in place, because that benefits the king...and when the king is happy, it goes well for Amaziah.

In bible study this week I told the participants that I veered from preaching the lectionary passage in Mark because it was about the beheading of John the Baptist. I couldn’t deal with that I said. “*And this is better?*” Someone asked. But I think both passages (New Testament, John, Old Testament, Amos) get to how dangerous, how life-threatening it can be to be a speaker of truth. Amaziah doesn’t threaten to chop off Amos’s head, but he tells him to get out of dodge, the implication being if he doesn’t things will not go so well for him.

So, what do we do with this? How might it speak to us today? Can you see, first, how it makes a great backdrop out of which to discuss, as we will next week, the document “Reclaiming Jesus?” How is religion being used, how is Christianity being used, to keep things in place in our country? How is the church called to follow in the footsteps of Amos, the one whose words stir things up and not Amaziah, the one who dismisses such words by not even bringing them into conversation?

“To comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” we were told in seminary. For today I would just say that the conversation around “Reclaiming Jesus” is an important conversation, and one I hope we can have in a manner both truthful and respectful. You may see, you may hear, a plumb line in this document. I know I do.

But there is another post worship meeting to note, the one happening today. It is an important meeting, sharing information about going forward with our capital campaign and I hope many of us will attend. But let us not forget: while our building is beautiful, while we’ve given money and worked hard to repair the roof, to restore this sanctuary, our building is not the most important thing to God. Our worship and music are beautiful, but they are not the most important thing to God. What is most important to God is the word of light and truth and justice this life-giving and life-challenging word of God that this be given space, that this be paid attention to and

that welcome of the stranger and care for the most vulnerable -- these biblical ethics -- be the basis of our worship and service. Our church needs always to be a place where we can come and hear the word of God, a word that is often edgy, that often challenges us to become our better selves and to make of our world a better place.

A long time ago these windows were made opaque, lest anything outside distract us from attending to the word of God.

May the word of God find a home in the people. May the word of God be alive in us.

Amen.