

Defining Your Plumb Line Reading: Amos 7:7-15 Proper 10/B 7/11/21
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Amos told the people: The Lord said to me, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

(Amos 7) What is a plumb line? What is your plumb line? And how does it measure up to God’s plumb line? This is the subject of today’s sermon and I will focus on the reading from the prophet Amos.

Carpentry and construction projects must be square, level, and **plumb** to be successful. A plumb line consists of a piece of heavy metal, attached to a string that hangs down by the pull of gravity.

(demonstrate) When placed against a wall or an object, a plumb line measures its vertical straightness. When a wall is “plumb” it means it is straight up and down. Since we have more sophisticated technology today, we rarely use this ancient plumb line when constructing walls. Instead, a level or a plumb laser is utilized to do the job. When a wall is “out of plumb” it means it is leaning over and risks being toppled in the future. My hunch is, as the foundation of the condominium in Surfside Florida began to be compromised (probably due to soil erosion), it began to lean forward. At this point, it was out of plumb and toppled to the ground.

In today’s reading, the prophet Amos uses the imagery of a plumb line to make his point; that the ethics of the people of Israel are not in line with God’s ethics of justice, mercy, and compassion. Simply put, their morals are “out of plumb” with God’s morals. As a result, the kingdom of Israel will eventually topple. Let’s take a closer look at the context in which Amos is delivering this very bad news.

Amos lived during the 8th century B.C.E. in the town of Tekoa, 7 miles south of Jerusalem in the Southern Kingdom of Israel. As you might remember, Israel had been divided into the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms, each having its own king. About 2800 years ago, Amos had a vision from God where he saw the injustices, the oppression, and the unfaithfulness of the people of the Northern Kingdom. He left his farm in Tekoa, went north, and began to preach against these injustices.

During this time, both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel were going through a period of unprecedented economic growth and political stability. Unfortunately, this prosperity was limited to the elite, the ruling class, those who controlled everything. This elite class benefitted tremendously as can be seen by their lives of leisure and luxury. They insisted on spending enormous resources to expand their military in order to keep the foreign nations at bay and the peasants under control. Sound familiar?

Through an organized process of taxation, the peasants bore the burden of providing for the prosperous life-styles of the rich and the resources needed for a strong army. Frequently, they would go into debt, having to use their land or a member of their own family as collateral. If they were unable to pay back the loan, their land would be confiscated and their family members sold into slavery.

On the religious front, many of the people in Northern Israel had a warped sense of what it meant to be faithful. Instead of focusing on justice and compassion toward their neighbors, they focused solely on offering the right sacrifices at choice temples. To make matter worse, they began to justify temple prostitution and even engaged in this practice. In summary, they and their understanding of Judaism were “out of plumb” with God’s covenant.

Amos is one of those prophets who towers over the others when it comes to defending the poor and accusing the powerful rich who use God’s name to legitimize their sin. For Amos, justice, compassion, and mercy toward all of God’s people are the key ingredients that make up the plumb line of his faith. So what might Amos say to us Christians today; people who live in the most privileged country in the world? Here is my best guess:

‘Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of America: I don’t know what happened to your moral compass! When did you begin to celebrate bullies instead of electing leaders who care for the common people? Why do you accept lies for the truth? Why do you tolerate the sin of racism and refuse to examine the details of your country’s past- in particular, the sin of slavery and the systematic extermination of Native Americans?’

You have rigged your tax system to benefit the rich, significantly increasing the wealth of the 1%. How is it that teachers, nurses, and front-line workers are paying a higher percentage of their income in taxes than multi-national corporations? Why are your CEOs allowed to deny their workers a living wage, while lining their own pockets with exorbitant salaries and benefits?

Wake up and face the facts! It wasn't the poor people on welfare who crashed your economy; it was the greedy and crooked bankers. It isn't the immigrants who are taking your jobs away; it is the greedy employers who intentionally hire those they can employ for cheaper wages in order to gain more profit. It isn't Medicare, Medicaid, or Social Security that is bankrupting our country; it is the tax cuts for the rich and an obscene level of military spending that amounts to over 700 billion dollars per year. You killed a man for a counterfeit \$20 bill while bailing out the Wall Street bankers who were at fault for one of the most severe global recessions since the great depression. Why did they get off scott free?

You worship at the altars of Amazon, Wallstreet, and Facebook, giving up on the faith that you once had. Instead of adhering to the promises and discipline of your Christian baptism, you have settled for a common, generic U.S. identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence, and part affluence. You market your savior, Jesus Christ, as a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, and a limited government that neglects the destitute, rather than preach his true nature as a humble servant of the abject poor. This deception makes me sick.

You say that you are pro-life, thus justifying the regulation a women's uterus more heavily than assault weapons. Yet you have not abolished the death penalty nor made significant advances in ending wars. In many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but refuse to support a safety net that would feed, educate, and house those children.

You continue to pursue the American dream of bigger, better, faster, and more at the expense of Mother Earth. Therefore, God has set a plumb line in your midst and will not pass you by. Your glaciers will shrink and your sea levels will rise. Storms, floods, drought, heat waves, and fire will blanket the earth. Pestilence and pandemics will afflict your loved ones, killing both the young and the old.

Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring ruin to the land: God despises your self-centered prayers and false pieties. Repent of your ways! Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Seek good and not evil, that you may live and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to you!' (Amos)

Amos' words are very harsh and condemning and they make his hearers very nervous. After he preached God's word to the people of the Northern Kingdom, he was told to get the heck out of town and never come back. He would probably be told the same if he were to preach in most of the churches in our country today. His biblical witness continues to be ignored by the rich and the powerful.

Yet, the biblical prophets are some of the most powerful and effective voices ever heard for keeping religion and politics honest, humble, and compassionate. Prophets can sniff out injustice and hypocrisy like a hound dog and are not impressed by positions of power or authority. Perhaps that is why they rarely receive a pension. Remember, "The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair." (Walter Brueggemann)

So what are the key components that make up the plumb line that guides your thinking and life choices? For instance, what factors do you take into account when you vote for a leader? Is your decision based on party affiliation, tax cuts, race or gender? Or do you base your decision on what is best for the commonwealth of our country? When you buy a car, what factors go into your decision? Do think about its carbon footprint and gas mileage, or do you look for something that is big, comfortable, and sharp looking? When you think of donating to charity or to the church, do you give generously of your income? Or do you hold back and focus instead on satisfying your own pleasure and cravings? Remember, how we spend our time and money and energy reveals much about our plumb line.

For us Christians, a plumb line is laid out for us in our baptismal promises. We are called to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. To persevere in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to God. We are to proclaim by word and example, the Good News of God in

Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. And finally, we are to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. (BCP 304/5)

I think this plumb line 'lines up' with the words of Amos the prophet. In 722 BCE the kingdom of Israel was toppled by the Assyrians & the population deported. Let us pray that the same will not happen to us.