

Plumb Line Prophecy

Amos 7:1-17

Not many tourists to Washington, D.C., visit the offices of the Federal Bureau of Standards. People go to tour the Capitol, the White House, the Supreme Court Building, the Smithsonian.

Yet the Bureau of Standards offices hold something that impacts our life every single day. That's the place where the perfect example of every weight and measure we have finds its final proof. Everything we weigh, measure, pour out is judged by the perfect measurements stored under protection there.

This morning our lesson focuses on a guy named Amos, a herdsman and fig farmer from the farm country south of Judah. Although just a farmer, he knew a false measurement when he saw one.

The nation of Israel was intoxicated with optimism —optimism based on false standards. The people were happy, had plenty of money, nice homes, beds carved of ivory, enjoyed lives of leisure. Business was booming and national boundaries were expanding. But it was all a facade based on false confidence.

Behind it there was spiritual rot at the nation's heart, and Amos could see it. He knew counterfeit security from the real thing. And God called him to take the message of impending judgment to the nation's capital.

Time after time Amos told the Israelites how they were measuring success by false standards. He warned them about the consequences of not returning to that which has validity, but the people didn't pay attention. It's no wonder he wasn't popular.

God gave Amos three visions of judgment. In the first, a swarm of locusts would devour Israel's crops unless the people returned to their religious roots. In the second, a fire would come and leave their beautiful cities lying in rubble.

The people were unmoved. Amos didn't like to be the bearer of bad news (not many people do) and he begged God to relent and spare the people. God heard him, honored the request, and held back the locusts and fire. But God presented Amos with a third and final prophetic vision.

While the first two judgements took the form of utter ruin through an act of God, the third vision was not so much a judgment as a measurement of where they were spiritually. God said he would send a plumb line to demonstrate the spiritual state of the nation. **"I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel"** (vs.8).

A plumb line is a weight suspended from a line for fixing or measuring vertical direction. Most often it's used to determine the straightness of walls. It can also be used to measure the depth of water.

A plumb line is not a judgment but a test. It tells whether a wall is really true or not. When a builder wants to check their work, they use a plumb line to see if it's true to the vertical. A plumb line's greatest strength is that it never fails. It's as certain as the law of gravity by which it works.

The spiritual plumb line God talks about in the third vision would measure whether or not the Israelites were truly upright. It would measure the depth of their commitment to God and expose just how shallow they were. God's plumb line would make evident to Israel how far they had deviated from righteousness.

We, today, live in an out-of-plumb society. Have you watched the news lately? Time and again we read that America is a very spiritual nation. We even brag about it on our coins: "In God we trust."

We bandy phrases about spirituality and about God on television talk shows, but I sometimes wonder which god people are referring to. In America we speak of God when we pledge allegiance, and we speak to God when we get into trouble.

But how much of it is legitimate? How much of it has depth? How is it that while the polls show the number of "born-again Christians" increasing, morality in America is decreasing? Do you sense that the morality and spirituality of this nation is adrift?

I wonder how closely we resemble the people in our reading this morning. I mean, we are economically prosperous. We have more money than any nation in history. The worst of our houses are luxurious by the standards of most other countries.

Militarily, we're strong and secure. We live lives of luxury and leisure, but our commitment to God is often casual and half-hearted. Overseas it's been written that "In America, Christianity is 3,000 miles wide and a half-inch deep!"

We're not at all what we like to think we are. We're out of plumb with God's design for us.

Many churches are leaning out of plumb where theology tends to be shallow and sermons are often designed to be inoffensive. Oh, we don't mind speaking out against issues, so long as we're reasonably certain that what we say will not offend the people of power in our congregations.

God calls us to repentance, beginning not in the White House but in this house: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

And what a difference a call makes! How far different Amos was from the run-of-the-mill preachers of his time!

There was a reason why God had to reach down into the hinterlands to raise up a prophet for the capital city. It was simply that the capital city prophets were wimpish and ineffective.

Notice, for example, Amaziah, the chief priest of Bethel. Bethel means "God's house." Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, went to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" (vs.10-11).

Amaziah had lost all interest in hearing God's word and had sold his soul to King Jeroboam II, one of the cruelest leaders in all history. Amaziah, whose name means "God is strong," had forgotten the message of his name.

Lacking the intestinal fortitude to speak out against Jeroboam's cruelty and interested only in maintaining his position, he did more than simply stay silent. He became a traitor against God's servant Amos.

He twisted Amos' words and reported to the king what was, in fact, a lie. Then Amaziah confronts Amos in the name of the king, saying 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom' " (vs. 12-13).

What Amaziah did not count on was that Amos would not back away. This is how Amos responded:

“I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ Now therefore hear the word of the Lord.

You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’ Therefore thus says the Lord: ‘Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.’” (vs.14-17).

The two major differences between Amaziah and Amos is that Amaziah pursued a position while Amos was in a position that pursued him. Secondly, Amaziah pursued his own agenda whereas Amos pursued God’s agenda. The focus of Amos’s message was God, not himself.

We’ve all met people like Amaziah, those outwardly religious types who sell their souls to climb the ladders of power, prestige, and pride. Often they wear external robes of righteousness that make them look like true followers of Jesus. They learn the language of faith and bandy it about to suit their self-centered purposes. Yet, they don’t have a deep and lasting relationship with God through his Son, Jesus.

There are Amaziahs in every church. They relish positions of visibility and leadership, but they don’t know the One true King and Head of the church who went to the cross to redeem their souls.

Perhaps God leaves them among us as a reminder of how even the mighty are susceptible to falling when they fail to measure themselves against God’s plumb line.

And there are people like Amos in every church, dedicated servants of God called with a holy passion and an urgent desire to do his work and speak God’s truth, whose plumb line is God’s Word.

For them, the Apostle Paul’s words hold true: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission” (1 Cor. 9:16-17).

Lastly, understand that God’s plumb line is everlasting. His plumb line for us is Jesus, the only unfailingly true and perfect One who ever lived.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all has been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. — (Col 1:15-20)

Jesus knows well the depth to which we are willing to go with God and the straightness of our walk with him. He is the Cornerstone of the church and the Master Architect of the universe.

It is he who builds character within us and he alone who made the sacrifice that was necessary to straighten us out when we were crooked and out of sync with God.

So if your life leaning in the wrong direction, come to the great plumb line, Jesus. Put your life in his hands. Give him your struggles and find new strength to live on a straight and narrow path that leads to eternal life in his presence forevermore.