

Where Is Our Plumb Line?

In case you have ever felt the urge to be a prophet, you should know. It's a dangerous line of work. It can even get you killed. Just ask John the Baptist. And, Jesus. Or how about Martin Luther King. And that's just to name a few of the most famous examples. But this morning's prophet takes us way, way back in the biblical story, 800 years before John the Baptist and Jesus. Back to a time when there were two kings over Israel.

As we heard this morning, the man known as Amos of Tekoa swears he didn't want to be a prophet. God basically gave him no choice. Tekoa was in the southern kingdom of Judah. And Amos was making a nice, quiet life for himself as a herdsman (herdsman of what, he doesn't say). And on the side he was a "dresser of sycamore trees." It tells us something about Amos that neither animals nor trees can talk back to you. (I'd say there was a good chance Amos was an introvert! 😊)

But then he started hearing things. And soon, seeing things. And of course, saying things. Unpopular things. Critical things. Dangerous things.

What he heard was the voice of the LORD. Aka Yahweh. The personal, providential God of the Israelites.

Amos says, at the very beginning of his "book," that he heard the voice of the Lord "roaring from Zion," [*"And he said: The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; 1:2*] that famous, ancient city. And Amos felt strongly compelled to speak what he heard. At first Yahweh's words were far reaching, judgments against other nations and cities. Nations like Edom, and Moab, and Ammon. Cities like Damascus, and Gaza, and Tyre. But then Yahweh's words came much closer to home. Judgments against the southern kingdom, Judah, which as I said was Amos' home. But judgments especially against the northern kingdom, which had retained the name of Israel, with Jeroboam as its king.

God's judgments against Israel fell into two main categories: judgments against how they worship, and judgments against their economic practices and policies. Listen to this now famous speech from earlier in the Book of Amos, rivaling even Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech (in Amos' case, he was speaking Yahweh's own words): *"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* Amos 5:21-24. (Martin Luther King actually quoted this last verse in his "I have a dream" speech.)

As it happens, the word "justice" (*mishpat*, in Hebrew) is one of the most important words in the Old Testament. Especially in the psalms and the prophets. That's because where there is no *mishpat*, there can be no *shalom* (the important, Old Testament word for peace). Where there is no justice, there can be no peace.

Justice means fairness. Justice means everyone having enough. Justice means caring for the poor and oppressed . . . in order that there may be no poor and oppressed. Justice is

everyone's job. But it is especially the job of those having the most power. Which means that in the Old Testament, justice was especially the job of the king.

I said earlier that in addition to hearing things, the prophet Amos began seeing things. Things the Lord God "showed" him. First, it was a horde of locusts. We read in 7:1, "*This is what the Lord God showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout*" [7:1]. Next, it was a "shower of fire." *Amos 7:4, This is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord God was calling for a shower of fire*" [7:4]. Both times, Amos knew what these visions meant. That the Lord God was going to destroy Israel. Both times, Amos pleaded for God to change His mind. *Amos 7:2--"O Lord God, forgive I beg you!" Amos 7:5; "O Lord God, cease, I beg you!"* [7:5]. Both times, the Lord relented: *7:3--"The Lord relented concerning this; it shall not be, said the Lord."* And 7:6; "*The Lord relented concerning this; This also shall not be, said the Lord God,*" [7:6].

But then came a third vision. This morning's vision. *Amos 7:7--"This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand."* And this time, Amos stayed silent. So the Lord spoke to Amos. "*Amos, what do you see?*" Amos answered [*And I said*], *a plumb line.*" [7:8].

A plumb line, as we heard this morning in the Time for Children, is basically a string, with a weight tied to the end. It was used in building a house, or any other kind of building. When held up, the plumb line would show whether a given wall was straight and true, or whether it was crooked, tilted, untrue.

Once again Amos knew what God was saying. He was saying that the people of Israel, and especially their king, were crooked, untrue, unjust. And this time, Amos didn't plead for God to change his mind, for God to relent. Because Amos had run out of patience with his kinspeople. Amos had lost hope that they would ever change their ways, become more just.

It's a dangerous job, being a prophet. Here is what Amos said to the Israelites. "*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.*" The "high places" and sanctuaries were where the people worshipped. Or at least, pretended to. Jeroboam was their king, the one who more than any other was supposed to care about justice, and didn't. But Amos didn't back down—he spoke these dangerous words.

Did they come true? Well, within a matter of years, the northern kingdom of Israel was attacked and laid waste by the Assyrian Empire, and its king, Sennacherib. And yes, its people were taken into exile. Ironically, King Jeroboam of Israel apparently survived and, we are told in 2 Kings 14:29, died peacefully. While being a prophet is a dangerous job, it seems that kings and other world leaders can get away with anything.

So what does this mean for us? I couldn't decide whether to title my sermon "Where Is Our Plumb Line?" or "What Is Our Plumb Line?" Because frankly, I'm not sure we even have a plumb line. As a nation, sure, we have the Constitution, guaranteeing "liberty" for everyone. And we have all kinds of lip service to America being a land of equal opportunity. But is it really? As a church (specifically, First Mennonite Church), we have our own "constitution," but it says nothing about justice or caring for the poor in our community. Its concern is mainly about how we govern ourselves. Which is fine; that was the purpose of this brief document. But we also have the Bible, and have committed ourselves to following it. Moreover, we have our

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective [hold up], which to its credit has separate articles on “Christian Stewardship” (that is, what we do with our money, Article 21); “Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance” (Article 22); “The Church’s Relation to Government and Society” (Article 23); and “The Reign of God” (Article 24). And all of these talk about, each in their own way, our mandate as Christians to care about justice, about what it means, what it looks like to care about justice.

Those are our plumb lines, and they are good ones. But how are we doing, both as a church, and as individuals within the church? Are we straight, or are we crooked? Are our worship practices genuine, or are they “just words?” And what about our economic practices? How do we use our money? Do we share it as generously as we can? Are there still poor in our land? If so, are we speaking out on their behalf, and doing what we can to help them? Or do we simply stay silent in face of injustice, whether in our community, our country, or our world?

To our credit, we support such local initiatives as Main Street Ministries and CarePortal, and we give significant support to Mennonite Central Committee, the relief agency of our denomination, by including them in our special offerings, and some of us like to help with the meat canning each fall, and by tying comforters to send to impoverished countries. But we can do more—we can always do more. We can be more generous with our time and money. And, we can be more brave with our voices. We can speak out. We can be prophets. Even if it is a dangerous line of work.

In the days to come, I encourage us to think about and discuss these things further. And I will have more to say about them next Sunday, when we will look together at another passage from the Book of Amos, in which we will learn about the fourth vision Amos had, the fourth image God showed him, namely the one about the “Basket of Summer Fruit.” Amos 8:1-12. In case you want to read it ahead of time.

{Introduce Song of Response.} Our new hymnal includes a lot of hymns and songs that talk about justice. Some of them are new, and some we’ve already been singing for a long, long time. For today’s song of response I’d like us to learn one of the new ones. And as we are learning it, and as you are able, I encourage you to pay attention to the words, and look for phrases and images that might have been inspired by the prophet Amos.