

PLUMB LINE

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Amos 7:7-17

I am a regular source of annoyance to my wife and daughter for, among other things, my habit of yelling at the TV news. There is one particular type story that always demands that I “express myself” and that is the airplane crash story. Fortunately, these don’t happen too often. The news always employs this story as a teaser before a commercial break. “When we come back, we will ask why an airplane crashed into a cornfield in Iowa.” After they say this, I will explain to that TV very calmly and very rationally that I already know what caused this plane to crash. It is simple. It was gravity. It’s always gravity. That mysterious black box may tell the investigators that a wing fell off, or an engine exploded, or the pilot was texting his wife. But these are all secondary. The reason for any plane’s unplanned rapid descent is always gravity. An airplane in flight is at war with gravity. The airplane fights to stay in the air while gravity pulls it toward the earth. One hiccup and gravity will triumph. I have a firm understanding of physics, but I will always argue that flying is a miracle.

The old comedians used to say that in life there are two certainties: death and taxes. I guess that was funny at one time. But those are not the only certainties. There is also the certainty of gravity. Gravity is a constant. It never changes. It is always present. And it is not very funny. Those comedians who were seeking a laugh out of their audience also knew to steer clear from the subject of gravity. Why? It just brings people down.

Our reading for today is from the book of Amos and it begins with a discussion of gravity. Sort of.

In this passage, the prophet Amos describes God as standing next to a wall. This would have been a stone wall. This wall is described as having been built with the use of a plumb line. This detail indicates that the wall was built carefully, that it is perfectly perpendicular to the ground. It isn’t leaning to one side or the other. It is a good wall. God is standing at the wall there holding a plumb line, and God asks Amos, *What do you see?* Amos, not one to let the obvious pass him by, answers, *I see a plumb line.*

A plumb line is not complicated. It is a weight on a string. It is an ancient tool used even today by builders and masons. It is used in the construction of things that are vertical—walls, buildings.

We call it a plumb line (or a plumb bob) because the weight was often made of lead. The Latin word for lead is *plumbum*, the same word from which we get plumber, because in Roman days, pipes were made from lead.

The book of Amos is found toward the back of the Old Testament. It is part of a section of twelve books known as the minor prophets. They are minor only because the books are short. Amos' message, however, is anything but minor. What he says is as powerful and hard-hitting as anything you will find in scripture.

Amos lived in the 8th century BC. What we know about Amos is that he was not a professional prophet. He started out life as shepherd and farmer in the southern kingdom of Judah. But somewhere along the line, he was called by God to preach to the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos follows God's call and travels to Israel. In Israel, he delivers powerful and pointed critiques against Israel's social, political, and religious structures and institutions. Amos focuses on the social inequities that allowed the wealthy to live in luxury while the poor withered away. Amos writes, *Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils* (6:4-6). He addresses the people's religious life and is critical of worship that fails to promote justice and righteousness. He condemns those who *have turned justice into poison* (6:12). According to Amos, God has always called for equality among his people. But now, in Israel, a few people have become rich at the expense of the increasing number of the poor. We would say the equality gap is widening.

Amos announces this problem over and over. Earlier, in Chapter 5, he says, *They hate the one who calls for justice... [They] abhor the one that speaks the truth. As a result, you trample on the poor and snatch from them their necessary grain for living; you build houses of fancy stones... You have afflicted the righteous, taken bribes, and shoved aside the needy in the marketplace.* (5:10-12) (paraphrased)

The core of Amos' preaching can be found in the words we know so well: *let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

For Amos, justice and righteousness are to be preferred over fancy worship, ostentatious offerings, grand songs, and heavenly harps. Living a righteous life is the greatest form of worship.

After Amos identifies that plumb line in God's hand, God speaks to Amos, and this is the message Amos bring to Israel:

*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.*

The prophesy of Amos is that God will judge Israel. In our reading, Amos warns that God will take that plumb line that he is holding and will set it in the middle of the people. Just as a mason uses a plumb to determine if a wall is vertical, God will use the line to measure the uprightness of the people. If the people are found to be

‘out of plumb,’ they will face God’s judgment. Their temples and shrines will be destroyed, and God will rise up against the people with a sword.

The question that Amos forces us to ask is this: What is our plumb line?

A plumb line keeps the thing you are building in right relationship with the world around it—perpendicular to the constant pull of gravity. A plumb line ensures that any wall or column is undeniably vertical.

Imagine that your life is represented by a wall that you are building brick by brick. You have full control over where each brick will be set. What do you use as your plumb line?

Different people have different plumb lines. Some measure their lives with wealth. Other measure with power. For others it is fame. Some people ask, “Am I important?” or “Will I be remembered?” or “Am I happy?” That is their plumb line. That is how they choose to align themselves.

For the prophet Amos, the plumb line was justice and a belief in the Lord. He preached that this is how people are to measure their lives. Are they properly aligned with God’s call for justice and equity?

As people of God, our plumb line is the Word of God, the scriptures, the commandments, the words of the prophets such as Amos and Isaiah. Do we follow the commandments? Are we working for justice and righteousness, for compassion and forgiveness? Do we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves? Do we seek to build a right relationship with God and our neighbor?

When I was in college, there were lots of students who weren’t quite sure what they wanted to do in life. And that was fine. We were young. But there were also those who did know what field they wished to pursue. They were the future doctors, and teachers, and lawyers, and accountants. There were also artists and musicians, and more. But there was one guy in my class who made it clear to everyone—students and faculty—that his singular goal was to possess one million dollars by the time he hit the age of thirty. I didn’t know this guy well and never asked how he planned to accomplish that goal. But even at the time, my shallow, college-aged self recognized the emptiness of this plan. I have no idea what happened to this person. Did he make his money? What it enough? Did it satisfy him? What happened when he hit 31? Was his life over? My picture of him is of this person whose plumb line is the accumulation of wealth. Everything he does—every brick in his wall, every choice, every decision—is calculated against that line. Maybe he ended up with a great, shiny wall of wealth. But how many people did he hurt to get there? How many relationships were lost? How many lives were shattered? What was the toll of suffering along the way? Maybe he didn’t care? That wasn’t his line.

As people of faith, we recognize God to be a constant in our lives. God is our gravity. The German theologian Paul Tillich labeled God “The Ground of Being.” Our plumb lines should point directly toward God.

As Christians, we value the ministry of Amos, but our faith calls us farther. Our faith leads us to Jesus Christ who is our example in living and service. He is our plumb line. Remember his words: *I am the way, the truth, and the life.* For us, Christ is how we measure what is loving and compassionate and just. As the Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, *Live in love, as Christ loved us* (Eph 5:2).

Before I finish, I would like to give you some homework. I don’t do this often, but I ask that this afternoon, when you get home, I would like for you to take a moment and make a list of the plumb lines in your life—what do you use to measure who you are. Be honest. Don’t just put “Jesus” but include everything, including those things that maybe you aren’t so proud of. Then evaluate this list and use it to develop a new plumb line for yourself—a line that will make you right with God. Amen.