

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.8.18
Scripture:

Amos 7:7-15

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.⁸ And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line."

Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by;⁹ 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."

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent 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.¹¹ For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.' "

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there;¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees,¹⁵ and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known.

Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him."¹⁵ But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."¹⁶

But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.¹⁸ For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."¹⁹ And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not,²⁰ for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.²¹

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.²² When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it."²³ And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom."²⁴ She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."²⁵

Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter."²⁶ The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did

not want to refuse her.²⁷ Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison,²⁸ brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother.²⁹ When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Walls that aren't straight don't stand as walls for long. Walls that don't square will collapse under the weight of the building. All walls eventually fall, of course; but ones that weren't vertically true in the first place fall that much sooner.

The standard for measuring a wall is a plumb line.

The word Amos used in his not-prophecy (for he wasn't a prophet, nor was he the son of a prophet, but was a herdsman) isn't used anywhere else in scripture. The word is most often rendered in English "plumb line." Scholars, though, question whether this is what was meant. Many doubt Amos was speaking here of a plumb line; many doubt that what the Lord showed him was a plumb line. But they don't know what he *was* talking about, what he was shown; and "plumb line" makes sense in this context. So, though one scholar said, "...preachers will do well to look beyond the obvious choice to focus on the symbol of the plumb line and explore other aspects of today's texts," I'm going to focus on the obvious choice, that plumb line.

I've been agitated lately. I imagine you have been too. The barrage of bad news; the constant untruth coming out of the executive branch; the persistent, popping-up headlines and alerts of breaking stories; corruption, collusion, corporate malfeasance, trade wars, secret talks, upward flows of money and power while the electorate becomes less enfranchised and more doubtful that anything we do will make any difference at all: I've been agitated lately, and, as a preacher, I'm never quite sure how much of that belongs here in the pulpit.

I apologize if I've gotten it wrong.

Pastor, prophet, priest: these are the choices laid before me each week, and in the past I've tried to make an even mix of it. Lately, though: lately, it's felt like prophet-time all the time. A recent exception was Edie Ross's recent funeral here, and to be honest this was one of the surprising blessings of that otherwise sad time. The eulogy was a chance to preach pastorally more than prophetically, and I, for one, welcomed the break.

Another chance comes today—when even the prophetic reading takes a more pastoral turn. Seeming to suggest we all just calm down, slow down: trust.

A plumb line.

This is the third vision in a series of three that came to Amos in the eight century before Christ, before the Common Era. Each of the three imagined the destruction of the people in their land—but there was a crucial difference between the first two and the third.

This is typical, of course—this “imagining destruction.” The biblical prophets were full of warning, as full of that as they were of promise. What’s odd about Amos’s sounding a warning is that his was a time of peace and prosperity for this ancient United Kingdom, Israel and Judah. Gathered as such under the inspiring and battle-ready leadership of King David, and secured under the civilizing leadership of his son King Solomon, this United Kingdom continued on, riding the momentum of stability and accumulation. There were, as you’d expect, little battles on the borders, defending of territory and negotiation of boundaries. But over all, things were good.

As happens, though, with settled societies, the comforts of life were going mostly to those who already had comforts in life. Wealth attracts wealth, right? Really, unless there’s intent and action for it to be otherwise, riches go to the rich, who by these become richer. And I know what you’re thinking: with the people Israel/Judah, there *was* the intent to correct for increasing inequality; this was inherent in their original call to be a people in the first place, concern for the widow and orphan, concern and just policy for the sake of the poor and the lame. But over the decades, the now centuries, this concern had gone slack.

And it was this slow build and acceptance of inequality among the people that had Amos called away from the sycamore and out of the herds to prophesy, that had him calling out to those who “oppress the poor” and “crush the needy,” these less fortunate of which he likely considered himself.

“Alas for those who are at ease in Zion,” he cried. “Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and cows from the stall... who drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph [the people].” Yes, Amos would issue forth the familiar promise that justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. But, see, he also had less lovely things to say.

As to the three visions of this portion of Amos’s prophesying, first, the Lord showed Amos locusts, forming at the time when the latter growth began to sprout, the implicit threat being that

the Lord would then send actual locusts to bring low this now unjust nation. But Amos begged the Lord not to. “It shall not be,” said the Lord. Second, the Lord showed Amos a shower of fire that the Lord would send to devour the land, the implicit threat being that the Lord would do this as punishment. But Amos begged the Lord not to. “This also shall not be,” said the Lord. Third, the Lord showed Amos a plumb line. A plumb line—this which has no power to destroy or to lay waste, this which only gauges and gives witness to what is, the implicit threat being...what? Realization? Recognition? Sometimes a little self-knowledge is as painful a thing as you can imagine.

I had an interesting correspondence once with a woman whom I knew in high school and who’d read my book. She got in touch to ask about my apparent disregard for God as judge. Taking issue with my seeming to dodge God’s judgment of the world, she seemed to find something crucial here missing. It’s a familiar critique against the liberal wing of the church, and a valid one. If God isn’t, among things (shepherd, father, mother, king, author,) also a judge, then is this whole thing just a matter of “anything goes”? What, then, of justice? Doesn’t a courtroom dispensing justice require a judge to oversee the proceedings, to make sure they’re fair and free, not coerced or corrupt, not lopsided or “kangaroo”? And wouldn’t we all benefit from someone who could see “from above,” as it were, not only in the moment of what we’ve done but also in a larger context that includes what we’ve been up against?

I’ve not spent much time in court. But when Jesse had suit brought against him, the mother of a patient who committed suicide at Austen Riggs, those two weeks of litigation were made intelligible by the judge. The testimony of the mother was just too crazy, accusatory, both self-serving and self-defeating, impossible to follow. She made a *terrible* witness, and it all had me feeling that much worse for her now deceased daughter. The judge, for his part, though, whenever he spoke up, reset things to right, cleared the room of the fog of confusion she created and calmed everyone of the increasing anxiety that you could *feel*.

I responded to my high school acquaintance that I think I didn’t, in my book of sermons, dodge the challenge that is God as judge. And I don’t think I doubt God as judge. But I do question God as executioner.

As it happens, it’s a question the Bible invites—does God bring God’s wrath on wrongdoers, or does wrong-doing bring about its own end? Does God punish injustice or is

injustice the sort of thing that, not in need of punishment, simply self-destructs, even if *painfully* so, tragically so?

There are times when it's clearly stated that the Lord brings destruction on those deemed worth of destruction, on situations deemed worthy of condemnation. One such time is right here in Amos's testimony, with the Lord saying of King Jeroboam of Israel, "I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with a sword." Another such time is earlier in this book when there's asked the rhetorical question, "Does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it?"

But there are also times when it's suggested otherwise. Paul, writing to the churches though 800 years after Amos, was circumspect on this question, sometimes ascribing calamity to God's wrath, but other times recognizing calamity as simply the result of human decision and action, and still other times as something that ought to evoke human compassion. Jesus, for his part, wasn't simply circumspect on the question, but downright critical of the assumption that tragic ends suggest God's condemnation. He once even asked a crowd to whom he was preaching in parables, "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" The fact that this was, apparently, a rhetorical question should suggest that Jesus knew it to be an absurd conclusion: of course those who die in a terrible accident aren't therefore safely deemed subjects of God's wrath!

And then there's the biblical fact of the crucifixion of Jesus, which complicates the question as much as anything could—for if Jesus is indeed the beloved Son of God, then misfortune or a dreadful end, which Jesus certainly suffered, cannot simply be indicative of God's wrath or displeasure; and if misfortune *is* understood as indicative of God's wrath, then Jesus must not be the beloved Son of God. So, which is it going to be? Which confession should we be willing to let go? That God doles out just desserts or that Jesus is the Beloved Son of God? I know which one I'm going to stick with.

But we don't even have to go so far afield as the gospel narratives to have the question begged of us. That plumb line. What a strange vision for an otherwise fiery book of prophecy. What an unthreatening vision to accompany visions of locusts and engulfing fire.

A plumb line—this which simply evaluates, measures, judges the quality of what's been built; this which simply indicates how true the construction is to the original plan. That God would put a plumb line among the people, that the people would have a chance to check their

own work, that they could correct themselves if need be, or they could just let things go until it all collapses for its being less than true, perhaps downright untrue.

This is likely what made Herod so afraid. When he'd heard about Jesus sending people out to do the work of the gospel, he became terrified, thinking even some crazy thoughts. That this Jesus was John the Baptizer raised from the dead to take vengeance on him. No, the math didn't work. Jesus was six months younger than John, and John was killed as a grown man whom Herod had killed but a few months earlier, so Jesus had to be someone other than John raised from the dead. But that's what happens to your thinking when the house you've built isn't true: you worry that it will fall, and then you figure it's your enemies out to knock it down because you know deserve it but you're not ever really going to admit that.

Herod did deserve it. He'd had John killed as dinner-party entertainment, and it was an icky dinner party to start with. Now married to the wife of his brother—a woman he'd stolen because why not, and because he could, which (#metoo) we've got to wonder how she felt about it. So let's take a minute and wonder about that:

Salome, Herod's now wife, did she enjoy being now married to a more powerful man than before, or did she hate that she had so little say in it all? I mean, did Sally Hemmings love Thomas Jefferson, her slave-master and her children's father, or did she do what she had to do in order to survive, and in order for her children to survive and eventually become free? Who knows? What this more ancient story tells us is that, after Herod ogled Salome's daughter who was also his step-daughter while she danced, Salome told her daughter, to whom Herod swore he'd give anything, to ask for John's head on a platter—John whom Salome knew Herod loved, though feared, and imprisoned, though continued to visit because he liked to listen to him talk. What she did was feckless, evil as regards John; but it was also perhaps punishing of Herod, and there might have been the real satisfaction, the real cause.

But all of this Mark, our gospel writer, presents as an aside. Something that had already happened, something had already established about Herod's reign—stupid, feckless, weak, powerful, Herod. Set beside Amos's vision of a plumb line, dropped into a system of power fundamentally untrue, it's suggestive, wouldn't you say?

Jeroboam's state where justice had gone slack would fall. Herod's terror-state would fall. Systems of justice that don't actually do justice will fall. Systems of power that exercise power

thought only in service of those who already have power will topple, like a top whose turning becomes slant. As for us—we who might eagerly watch for a plumb line indicative of God’s sense of rightness to help us discern—we can wait and watch and hope and resist cynicism, withstand weariness, keep our vision clear that we can recognize what truth is revealed in our midst.

The readings this week point to structural injustice playing itself out, and what hope they speak to is slow-hope, a grand arc toward justice that holds some promise for today, for this moment—some promise, though perhaps a dim and distant one. To be sure, if you’re the one suffering such galling injustice, the good news as promised this morning could well feel far off, even irrelevant. But if you’re not the one suffering this morning, right now, then you’re the one implicated into such hopeful withstanding, and hopeful standing-with. If you’re somehow privileged by the systems that will eventually fall, then you’re being called to witness and to act.

The kingdom is coming—which means it’s here and it’s not yet here. In the coming of true justice, of active mercy, or victorious love, or persistent forgiveness, that realm of glimmering promise is both here and not yet here. Those who need it most are the ones whose waiting is most active. Those who need it least—least pressingly, least pantingly—which is to say those who are also blessed in the realms of this world, are charged to work that the coming might be now.

If you have slack in your system, give of it to others. If you have blessing to spare, let it out to abound. The need is out there, and the promise of grace upon grace poured out will not fail.

Live as if this were true, and it will be true.

Thanks be to God.