

## “A Plumb Line”

Amos 7:7-15 • Psalm 85:8-13 • Ephesians 1:3-14 • Mark 6:14-29

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Last week, our Old Testament reading presented the call of the prophet Ezekiel; this week, it gives us the call of prophet Amos. Ezekiel is considered one of the “major prophets;” Amos is one of the “minor prophets.” That’s not because Amos’s message was any less powerful or relevant than Ezekiel’s – it’s just *shorter*. The book of Ezekiel has 48 chapters; the book of Amos has just nine. But what a nine! When Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, he quoted one of the most important lines in the book: “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” (Amos 5:24) Amos was a man of deep faith who knew that God cares about justice and righteousness – and he also believed that the nation that he loved was failing at both. Failing so much, in fact, that it was making God *very* angry. “I will not revoke the punishment,” says God through Amos to the people of Judah, “because they have rejected the instruction of the Lord and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked.” “I will not revoke the punishment,” says God through Amos to the people of Israel, “because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way.” Amos spoke of a God who cares so deeply about justice and righteousness that the *lack* of justice and righteousness in the land was making the people’s worship of God into a mockery of true faith. “I hate, I despise your festivals,” God said through Amos, “and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.” What God was saying through Amos was that if you are contributing to injustice in society or living unrighteously in your personal life, and then you go to worship God – well, you might as well have just stayed home. Worship isn’t *worship* if there’s injustice or unrighteousness going on. “Seek good and not evil,” proclaimed God through Amos, “and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you.... Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” In other words ... there’s still time for the people to *repent*. There’s still time for them to “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Amos lived about 800 years before Jesus. Like Ezekiel, we don’t know a great deal about his personal life. At this point in history, the Israelite people were divided into two; there was the kingdom of Judah in the south, and the kingdom of Israel in the north; two separate nations, with two different capitals, and two different religious centers. Amos was from the southern kingdom, from the village of Tekoa, about 8 miles south-east of Bethlehem. Today there is a Palestinian town called Teqoa, a little bit larger than Mason, adjacent to the remains of the biblical town. In 1975 Israel built a military outpost on a hilltop near Teqoa on land that was taken from the Palestinian people, then turned the outpost into an Israeli settlement; that’s one of dozens of settlements in the occupied West Bank that

are considered illegal according to international law. I am sure that Amos would have had something to say about that, because there is nothing *just* about the way Israel took and occupied those lands.

Amos describes himself as “a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.” That means that he was a shepherd, keeping a flock of sheep, and that he grew figs from sycamore trees. The process of “dressing” involves taking a knife and slitting the top of each fig to help it ripen quicker and to produce a sweeter fruit. So, Amos was a *farmer*, probably from a family of farmers. But God called Amos to leave his flock and trees behind and head north, to the nation of Israel, to proclaim the Word of God. How exactly this call came about, Amos doesn’t say; all we know is that something deep within him propelled him to leave everything behind and undertake a very bold, very courageous, very *risky*, job for God.

Amos went to Bethel, a city in the northern kingdom, where there was a sanctuary, a temple to God. This is the place where, in the book of Genesis, Jacob spent the night and dreamed of angels ascending and descending a stairway to heaven. Jacob called that place “Bethel,” which means “house of God.” By the time of Amos there literally was a “house of God” in Bethel, and a priest, named Amaziah. But Amaziah was idolatrous; he did not adhere to the principles and precepts of almighty God, but instead capitulated to Israel’s corrupt king, Jeroboam II. Jeroboam ruled Israel for about forty years and made Israel very prosperous through trade in olive oil, wine, and possibly horses. But that prosperity was limited to a few; there was an elite class of very wealthy people who lived in luxury in fine houses and palaces, and there was also a very large class of poor people who did not share in that wealth and prosperity and whom the rich exploited and oppressed. We know this not only from what the Bible says about that time period, but also from the archaeological remains of those massive homes, some of which contained monumental pillars and were adorned with ivory. Amos directed his preaching against the excesses of the elite and their lack of regard for the poor, and he also took aim at the king and the priest. Neither of them took kindly to that; Amaziah (the priest) sent Jeroboam (the king) an accusation against Amos – “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel!” – and forbade Amos from continuing to preach in Bethel: “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.” Amaziah was saying that it was more important to him that his temple served *the king* than that it served *God*. That is the very essence of idolatry; *never* should a religious leader who claims to be in the service of God capitulate to the whims of *any* human ruler!

Amos, on the other hand, was far more interested in serving *God* than serving *an unjust ruler*. Countless prophets, priests, and pastors have spoken out against injustice and corruption in the centuries since Amos; Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Pope Francis, and many others have all stood in the footsteps of Amos. So did Jesus, for that matter – he referred to Governor Herod Antipas as “that fox.” (Luke 13:32) And so did John the Baptist. The Gospels tells the story: Governor Herod – he was one of the sons of Herod the Great, and he ruled the territory that included Galilee – this Herod divorced his wife and then unlawfully married his own brother’s sister. John the Baptist took exception to this and spoke out against Herod. John was doing the very kind of thing that Amos had done, speaking out against the corruption and unfaithfulness of the king. Religious leaders are allowed to do that, even here in our country. We hold to a doctrine of “separation of church and state,” but what that means is that governments have no business establishing a religion or prohibiting the free exercise of religion. It does *not* mean that religious leaders are prohibited from speaking about political matters. If you go back to the mid-1800s, for example, you will find a *huge host* of pastors on both sides of the

Mason-Dixon line speaking passionately about the issue of slavery. The current IRS code allows non-profit religious organizations to advocate on issues that they deem important, but prohibits them from “participat[ing] in, or interven[ing] in ... any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.” Non-profit religious organizations cannot endorse candidates or give money to candidates, but rabbis, pastors, priests, and imams are all allowed to speak about *issues*. For example: can we *please* do something about semiautomatic assault rifles? All this bloodshed is so unnecessary. This is what John the Baptist was doing; he was speaking about the *issue* of Governor Herod’s unlawful marriage – and Herod didn’t like it. He imprisoned John in a desert fortress called Machaerus; then, later, he had John beheaded. According to the Gospels, this came about when Herod offered to give his stepdaughter “whatever you wish” after she danced for him and his guests. She asked her mother – Herod’s new wife – what she should ask for, and her mother answered, “The head of John the Baptist.” Herod “was deeply grieved,” yet he capitulated to the request. It was more important to him that he please his wife and his guests than it was to please God. An account of John’s death outside the New Testament, in the history of the Jews written by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, indicates that Herod was also worried about John’s “great influence” over the people and was fearful that John might “raise a rebellion” against him. Either way, a very good man ended up dead, at a bad ruler’s hands. Be careful how much power you give to the people who govern you; some of them care more far more about currying favor with their friends than they care about doing what’s right in the eyes of God.

Which brings us back to Amos. Amos had a vision from God about the way our conduct will be measured: “the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.” A plumb line is a weight suspended from a string. Gravity causes the weight to pull the string straight down. Carpenters in the ancient times discovered that if you use a plumb line as a reference when you are constructing, you end up with a much straighter and more structurally sound building. In Amos’s vision, he saw a wall, perfectly straight because it had been built with a plumb line, and *God* standing right next to the wall, holding another plumb line. God’s plumb line is the plumbline of *justice* and *righteousness*: a perfectly straight path, the path that we are *all* called to follow. God says: “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.” God is dropping this metaphorical plumb line right down in the midst of the people to see which are following that perfectly straight path of justice and righteousness. God knows that many are not going to measure up; not even the political or religious institutions would be spared: “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.” Which is exactly what happened ... just a few decades after Amos prophesied, the kingdom of Israel was invaded by the Assyrian Empire. The “high places” were made desolate, the sanctuaries laid waste, the kingdom utterly destroyed by the sword. Amos was right. God’s justice had come to an unjust people.

This is a grim story. The story of what happened to John the Baptist is also grim. Both stories are fundamentally about *justice* and *righteousness* – or the lack thereof. God is *very clear* about what kind of people we are expected to be. We have innumerable choices about how we are going to live this life. How righteous are we, *truly*, in our daily living? How much unrighteousness do we let slip in? How much do we *truly* care about the biblical value of economic justice in society? How much are we willing to perpetuate or condone injustice? These are the questions at the heart of this book. These are the questions at the heart of our *life*. What kind of people are we, *really*? Is that who God wants us to be?

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