

A Plumb Line

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10, 2022

Readings: Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

Sermon text: And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Amos 7:7

My brother and I have a small cabin in the Catskills from our stepfather, who built it in 1952 as a hunting cabin for him and a bunch of guys from Harrison New York. Primitive is a nice way to describe it. Teetering on the brink of collapse is another. So last weekend I was up there with Tom, my son Eli and his son Sam to do some work. We replaced some old siding and fixed some fascia, but it is going to take more than we can do to bring it back to plumb and level. But as we say, it's the cabin.

The prophet Amos, a shepherd and self described dresser of sycamore trees in the southern kingdom of Judah, visited the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of king Jeroboam, around 760 to 750 BCE. He told the people there he had a vision that God had called him to share. "This," he said, "is what the Lord God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb line'."

A plumb line—a lead weight on the end of a string—reveals the 90 degree vertical direction from the horizontal level revealed by the bubble of water in a water level. Plumb and level is what builders strive for; buildings out of plumb eventually lean too far and fall.

Amos was telling the king, your kingdom, Israel, is out of plumb and unlevel, idolatrous and unjust. The bottom line: God has taken your measure and the kingdom is doomed.

This wasn't well received. Amaziah, a priest of the sacred site in Bethel where Jacob had had his dream of angels ascending and descending, told Amos to stop prophesying here and go home. Amos told him he was going to end up in exile while his wife would be forced into prostitution and his children killed by the sword. Nice guy, Amos. But then he didn't go to Israel to make friends; he wasn't a professional prophet; he went because he was compelled by God to go warn the Israelites.

And his prophecy—like that of first Isaiah—came true. In 721 BCE Assyria swept out of the north, conquered Israel, and took the ten tribes into captivity. They have been lost to history since. The practice of the Assyrians was to replace the

population of one conquered area with captives from another. So the land of northern Israel was filled with a variety of relocated folks who eventually became known as the Samaritans—yes, the people of the man who helped the Jewish man who was robbed and beaten and left for dead in Jesus parable. Other Jews—a priest, a Levite—had passed him by, but the Samaritan stopped and helped him. “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

We have plenty of prophets these days predicting the fall of western civilization. It is certainly out of plumb, radically unequal, full of idols. We see signs that things are out of control all around us—of which this young man in Highland Park shooting people on July 4th is an all too predictable example. On bad days, thinking about the climate crisis, species extinctions, wars, gun violence, political division, Supreme Court decisions, it all seems pretty grim.

There have been a lot of bad days recently. It is pretty grim.

But we must not submit to what Paul in his letter to the Colossians called the power of darkness. We have been freed from that by the mercy of God. Freed by Jesus, guided and empowered by the Spirit, we are called to walk in the light—and bring light to a world caught in the power of darkness. We are called to break the cycle of violence, resist the increasing division and polarization, reject the temptations of idols and the lies of those who would claim to be saviors.

As a carpenter I aim for plumb and level. But nothing stays perfect. But sometimes the problem is not leaning out of plumb but rotting within.

I also worked this last week on taking apart a couple of rotten knee walls on the handicap access ramp to the parish hall. They were stoutly built but unfortunately not well designed to shed water. Over the last twenty years water seeped in, and when I opened it up the wood was moist and rotting, insects nesting and feeding—and the whole thing shot. On its way to the landfill—as all things and people eventually must. We are dust and to dust we shall return.

But some things are worth preserving, while others need a decent burial. And that is matter for discernment and wisdom. What things and institutions are treasures to keep and what efforts futile? Where are the seeds of new life we should nurture while letting go of other vestiges of the past? Baby and bath water, verities and fads; which is which?

In terms of eternal truths I hold up the teachings of Jesus. The exact nature or name of the neighbor may change—but the call to care and have mercy for those in need never does. The commandment to love—not only neighbors but even one’s enemies—is the foundation, the cornerstone on which all Christian edifices must be built. Justice and reverence, beauty and mercy, equality and freedom. These are the values we must hold dear and teach our children. They are embedded in the founding principles of our nation—and we must defend them. We also should discern locally, preserving that which is worth preserving, creating new possibilities when things are no longer viable—as in the restoration of the Thorne Building as a community center while Bennet College becomes a park. Another case is the magnificent Resurrection window in the back of the church, behind the organ. It is a masterpiece of American renaissance stained glass art. We will conserve and reorient it so that it can be seen in all its glory—more on that later.

And we must also be asking: What are the generative possibilities, where is new life, how is the Holy Spirit active and leading us now. We are the co-creators of new creation. We can move from parables of building to those of gardens— like the parable of the seeds. God is always sowing new seeds. And we have role to play in providing soil, water, care.

So let us be mindful of where things are out of plumb, or rotting from within. Let us be wise and act in a timely and judicious way to preserve and rebuild those things worth preserving, the core truths, the legacies of beauty and devotion. Let us always care for our neighbors, and ask the blessing of our God.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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