

A Plumb Line — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Amos 7:7-15

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 07-11-2021

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. 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.’ⁱ

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

Sermon Slide 1

Prophets are unpopular. But we need to listen.

The pairing of the Old Testament and New Testament passages for today may, at first glance, seem odd.

However, both passages are about Prophets whose message was rejected.

In John’s case, his message to King Herod was ultimately met with John’s death.

In Amos’ case his message to King Jeroboam and to the Priest Amaziah was ultimately met with the King and Priest’s death.

While both passages have much to teach us, for today, we are going to focus on the passage from Amos.

What we know about Amos all comes from this passage. Amos was from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He reports that he was a herdsman and a “dresser” of

sycamore trees. He was also not from a priestly or prophetic family line. God called Amos from where and what he was doing to go and prophesize against the people and King Jeroboam of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

That is what we know about Amos.

So, what was going on that God sent Amos up north to prophesize?

According to Elaine James, Assistant Professor of Theology at St. Catherine University

Amos prophesies to the Northern Kingdom (Israel) during the long and expansive reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE). This was a time of prosperity for the North.

Sermon Slide 2

Amos is concerned about the concentration of wealth among urban elites, and he repeatedly refers to their luxury goods as indicators of their moral decay. In one passage he openly mocks their luxuries:

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
And lounge on their couches,
And eat lambs from the flock,

And calves from the stall;
Who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
And like David improvise on instruments of music;
Who drink wine from bowl,
And anoint themselves with the finest oils,
But are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! (Amos 6:4-6)

This material prosperity seems to have come at the expense of the poor, and points to a growing gap between the rural poor and wealthier landowners: “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 2:7). Economic injustice — structural and systemic injustice that perpetuates social inequality — is his central concern.ⁱⁱ

Sermon Slide 3

I have mentioned several times that one of the major issues in the Old Testament prophetic writings is that the measure of a just society is if the widows, the orphans, and the strangers in the land can receive justice.

Amos is calling out the Northern Kingdom for not living up to that standard.

Prior to the immediate passage for today are descriptions of two other visions that Amos has from God. In both of these

instances, God relents on bringing judgment on Israel and her King.

In today's vision, of the plumb line, God does not relent.

Sermon Slide 4

A plumb line, as many of you know, is a piece of lead or tin hung from a string and is used to make sure a building is lined up properly.

We are told in Amos' vision that the building, Israel, was originally built with a plumb line – that is, it was founded by and through God and was “plumb.”

Amos' vision, however, tells us that Israel was no longer straight like it should be. Based on the other passages in Amos, we know that is because they failed at the proper worship of God, and they failed at keeping a just society.

The content of Amos' message is found in verses 9-11,

Sermon Slide 5

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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.'"

This is NOT a happy message from God.

Amos is not liked or appreciated by the Priest of Bethel or by the people and King of Israel.

Sermon Slide 6

Prophets are unpopular. But we need to listen.

Speaking the truth comes with risk.

Amaziah tells Amos that he should stop preaching in the King's temple and go back to Judah and prophesy there – the money is better.

Amaziah is in essence saying that Amos is only preaching in the North because he thought he would make a better living as a prophet there. That is why we know Amos' background – he was defending his message from God.

Additionally, and more importantly, Amaziah is taking the side of King Jeroboam II and the worship of God that takes place in the Temple at Bethel – the King's temple.

Amaziah was so caught up in defending HIS king and temple, that he was unable to hear the truth of Amos' message.

Sermon Slide 7

History proved Amos' message to be correct as in 722 B.C.E., the Kingdom of Assyria came and conquered the northern kingdom of Israel.

So, other than the fact that Prophets are unpopular, what do we take away from the passage for today?

One element we can learn from this passage, according to Tyler Mayfield, Professor of Old Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary is that

Sermon Slide 8

We are always the most upset at our prophets (or preachers) when they seem to be questioning our way of life, not when they question the actions of those with whom we disagree.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Kingdom of Israel saw their Kingdom disintegrate because of their failure to be a just nation.

Sermon Slide 9

What about us? Individually and collectively. Do we put the needs of the widow, the poor, and the immigrant ahead of our comforts and beliefs? Do we embrace those who are different?

Are we a just nation? And if not, do we individually and collectively as a church fight on behalf of the widow, the poor, and the immigrant? Would we be found wanting if Amos came to visit here today?

Another piece of information we glean from Amos is that God does not really care about the *form* of our worship.

In Amos, chapter 5, verses 21-24, God speaks to Israel,

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² 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.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

God declares Israel's efforts at worship to be pointless.

Israel had the temple at Bethel and the "high places" – think prayer gardens in the country as something similar. Those were the places the people of Israel worshipped.

Their worship, however, was not really about God. Their worship was "just something they did." Worship did not grow out of their relationship with God.

Sermon Slide 10

We need to examine ourselves and ask if our worship is “just something we do.” Does *our* worship come out of our relationship with God?

These are hard questions – questions that make some people uncomfortable. Do I do enough? Do I do the things I do for the right reasons? Do you?

We talk a lot about God’s love and mercy – yet we tend to leave out instances where God does not extend grace.

Julián Andrés González Holguín, Professor of Old Testament at Pacific Lutheran Theological School points out,

The biblical tradition describing a patient God, waiting for the people to change, was an attribute that Israel continually celebrated. This is the God who is “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6-7). However, this theological pearl in the Hebrew Bible may become cheap grace. God may relent from evil, but our text also states, “I will never again pass them by” (verse 8b). This seems to be one of Amos’ ways of saying that God runs out of patience. The angel of death passed over the Israelites in Egypt and no Hebrew firstborn were killed (Exodus 12:13). Amos claims

that God has had enough and brings death upon the people. ^{iv}

The role of the prophet is to speak on behalf of God to God's people.

Sermon Slide 11

Prophets are unpopular. But we need to listen.

Hearing truth spoken, challenges our preconceived ideas about the world. We don't like that.

That is the point of today's passage.

Sermon Slide 12

Will we hear God's word and change our beliefs and behaviors as necessary to truly align with God's desires and plans for our world?

Hard words to hear. Harder words to follow.

Let us pray,

Forgive us, O God—
cleanse our hearts and minds
of all that prevents us from loving you
and loving our neighbor.

May our lives be marked by faith active in love

as we watch and wait for your breaking into our world once more.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen^v

ⁱ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-amos-77-15-4>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-amos-77-15-3>.

^{iv} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15-2/commentary-on-amos-77-15-5>.

^v <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/search/label/Proper%2010%20B>. written by Moira Laidlaw, and posted on Liturgies Online. <http://www.liturgiesonline.com.au/>.