

The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ ≅ Year B
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
July 16, 2006

God's Plumb Lines and God's Justice: Plumb, Square and Level

Lessons for the Day

- ✘ Psalm 8
- ✘ Amos 7:7-15
- ✘ Ephesians 1:1-14
- ✘ Mark 6:7-13

Homily

I greet you in the name of **God our Creator**, **Christ our Brother**, and the **Holy Spirit** who sustains and sanctifies us, empowering us to love and to serve both God and Christ. (Pause)

Amen.

The Prophet Amos quotes God as saying,

"See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel . . . "

I have a friend named Jack who is a general contractor -- he learned the construction business from his father, who was also a builder. Jack began working in the business as a very young man -- a boy, really -- and by the time he was fifteen or so, his father felt comfortable enough with Jack's work to give him projects of his own.

One day Jack's father dropped him off to frame-in a porch -- the home-owners were going to turn un-used porch space into another bedroom for their expanding family. Jack told me that -- as his father left -- he said,

"Jack, I want you to frame-in this porch, and I want you to frame it in plumb, square and level."

I thought of Jack and his Daddy as I read this week's lesson from Amos -- a lesson where the Lord stands beside a wall, holding a plumb line.

Think for moment what a plumb line (and a level for that matter) does -- it **keeps the thing you are building in right relationship with the world around it**. A plumb line ensures that any upright in a building is absolutely vertical. A level makes sure that any horizontal component is completely level. Both of these tools give us a way to measure our work -- to see if the way we are building (as Jack learned with his Daddy) measures up to the master's standards.

The prophet Amos -- source of our Old Testament Lesson for today -- was active in the eighth century before Christ. Though born in Judah, his message from God was for the northern kingdom -- the kingdom of Israel.

Like Jack's father, the prophet **Amos was calling on the Northern Kingdom of Israel to remember God's plumb lines.** He was calling Israel to live up to God's standards. And it was a call the people did not want to hear.

The children of God in Israel -- like the children of God in Winston-Salem -- tended to see any exhortation to **live by God's standards as something that hemmed them in, that bound them, that kept them from being their best selves.** And they -- like me -- resisted. We see 'rules' (even God's rules; *especially* God's rules) as something that impinges on our freedom. Perhaps we should rethink this understanding.

I awoke early this morning to the sounds of jazz coming from my bedside radio. To the lay listener, jazz seems to be the most free-form of musical styles, as the soloists head off on riffs that take them in myriad directions. We love the form for many reasons -- spontaneity primary among them.

And yet . . . And yet the freedom of the form comes only when the musicians understand each other and the rules and conventions that govern jazz. They are **free to be their own best selves** -- individually and as a group -- only **when those rules** (like God's plumb line and my friend Jack's level) **keep them in right relationship with each other and the world around them.**

Amos prophesied in a time not unlike our own. The people he address-ed in Israel had lived through a long period of relative peace, with few threats from the major powers of the region. Prosperity was the order of the day -- at least for some of the people. As one source says:

" . . . peace seems to have been accompanied by prosperity -- at least for a few -- at the expense of many . . . "

Gene M. Tucker, Candler School of Theology, Emory University
Notes on the Book of Amos, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*

The prophet **Amos is perhaps best known for a single verse** that appears a couple of chapters before today's lesson. In the fifth chapter of Amos, verse twenty-four, Amos closes a long rebuke of Israel with this verse:

" . . . let justice roll down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Amos 5:24 (NRSV)

This verse was picked up by the many in the civil rights struggle and was used often by Martin Luther King. It is carved in granite in the sweeping monument across the street from the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

The entire book of Amos resonates with a call to justice and a condem-nation of the injustices rampant in Israel. Amos warns that -- because of Israel's injustice and its oppression of the poor -- God will punish Israel with a crushing military defeat.

Hard words. Hard words indeed.

There is always a price, however, when we ignore the plumb lines -- when we don't live our lives plumb and square and level. The price is just this: when we ignore the plumb lines, we cannot remain **in right relationship with God or each other or the world around us. And we cannot be our own best selves.**

So what?

Once -- long ago -- a shepherd and dresser of sycamores spoke God's words of rebuke and judgment to the people of Israel. The people didn't listen and -- some forty years after Amos prophesied -- the Northern Kingdom fell to the forces of the Assyrian King.

What can we make of this now?

Well, perhaps a couple of things.

First, we have the notion of God's plumb line. Amos' repeated calls to justice -- and his condemnation of oppression -- give us some idea of Amos' understanding of the plumb line: **the plumb line is justice** (as the founders of our country said) "for all."

As Christians -- those who live in the time after the birth of the promised Messiah -- we might name the plumb line as Jesus' exhortation in the Gospel of Mark:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength . . . (and) you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Mark 12: 30, 31a (NRSV)

However we name it, it is important to remember that **God has standards. We have** -- as the Gospel lesson reminds us -- **been adopted into God's family. And -- as members of God's family -- we are called to live up to God's standards.**

And we are also called to continuously examine all of society's standards in light of God's ongoing revelation, else we get (as in the case of segregation) ossified and stuck in societal norms that have nothing to do with the will of God. Matters of taste and preference are not matters of truth.

A **second learning** is this -- the **plumb lines free us to become our own best selves.** The plumb lines keep us in right relationship to each other, to the world around us, and -- especially -- to God. God's plumb line is not there to impinge on our behavior, but to allow us to become who God intended us to be at the moment God spoke us into being.

A **third key learning** from Amos could be just this: **God calls regular people (that's you, that's me, that's all of us) to speak the truth of the plumb line** to a world that can easily forget.

Amos tells Amaziah, the priest of Bethel,

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

Amos 7: 14a, 15 (NRSV)

Amos is regular folk -- a shepherd and part time tree-cutter. But he pays attention to what is going on around him. And he raises his hand to speak when what he sees is not what he knows to be God's deep desire.

As we sit here, now, in Winston-Salem, God is calling us to speak out about the things we see that are out-of-plumb, off-square, un-level. I don't know what you will see -- and I may not even agree with you -- but each of us is called to name the things that (in our judgment) are contrary to God's plumb line. And God calls us -- beyond naming -- to act on those injustices.

Perhaps God is calling you to **rectify injustices in educational opportunities** working with the Augustine project.

Perhaps God wants you to **serve the most vulnerable of our city** by working in Kid's Café.

Maybe God is calling you -- as God has evidently called John Shields -- to **become a hairdresser to the stars** (and the prisoners) by donating shampoo to the Forsyth County Jail.

Could **God even be calling you to lobby** for -- of all things -- a tax increase . . . a tax increase that would allow local authorities to see their way clear to funding healthcare for the poorest of our citizens?

I do not know. I simply know this: the God we serve -- the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Rebekah and Sarah and Leah -- is a God of justice and love. And God calls us to live by plumb lines that **keep us in right relationship with God and each other and the world around us. And -- in doing this -- we become our own best selves.**

As you participate in the Eucharist, remember that you take into yourself the body of Christ -- Christ who -- in love and obedience -- died for you.

In your own love and obedience, go forth from here to proclaim God's plumb lines of justice and love to a dark and hurting world.

AMEN