

Sermon for Trinity Church

Proper 23, 2021

“Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. 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.”

Let me pose a question: what does it matter to us what a Hebrew prophet wrote three thousand years ago? The prophet, Amos was someone who lived a century or more before Aristotle and Plato. Amos was a rural farmer, never knowing most of the material things we value today. Internet, cell phones, watches and more were beyond his imagining. How distant in time was Amos from us? In some ways, if we were transported across time to his era, we'd have no idea how to live. We might as well be on an alien planet. Likewise, for Amos. What could Amos do with a light switch and a cell phone? And yet, despite all those hurdles of the centuries lying between us, there's a call of Amos that echoes down to our time. Justice, Amos cries, God demands justice.

Here's the issue for Amos: our circumstances and context may have drastically changed from his time to ours, but the problems he identifies remain to this day. We may not share a common physical world, but we do share the same problems. Problems like: how shall we care for others? What shall we do about the poor? What is our responsibility as faithful people to those around us, even the creation around us? Why in fact, should we practice justice? Aren't people supposed to take care of themselves? Those questions remain alive even three thousand years later.

Early in his prophecies, Amos writes one of the most powerful images in the entire Old Testament. In an encounter with Amos, God speaks to Amos and asks Amos what he sees? And Amos replies, “a plumb line.” God continues, “See I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.” And God continues, “never again will I pass them by.”

We don't see plumb lines much at work today. A few years ago, we had a master craftsman make repairs on our back step. This fellow had learned traditional Japanese tools, hand saws and hammers, and as it happens, used a plumb line. A neighbor spied the carpenter using the plumb line and wondered aloud, “What's that?” Even when I was a child, decades ago, plumb lines were already being replaced by the level and now, today, by the laser. But once we know what a plumb line is supposed to do, we do know what they are for—the drop of plumb lines measure to see if construction is straight. If what we measure is not true because of failures in construction, then the edges and verticals will bend and distort and likely collapse.

We can take away several insights from Amos and his prophecy. God as God will dwell among the people of Israel, and by implication, nearly three thousand years later, God will dwell with us as well. We also know that God will hold us to the true measure of a plumb line. We can take away important lessons from this prophecy. First, we as human beings and especially as communities, including churches, are constructed over time. That's common sense, I'm sure. What's important to see is that the success of that construction is far from a given. We can construct our communities to be faithful to the call of God, much as we know God's call in the

Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes. Or, conversely, and disturbing to our ethics and souls, we can ignore the plumb line of God. We can build communities of injustice and tragedy. What's the summary of the Law that Jesus teaches? Love God and love your neighbor as yourself, the very weight and line of the plumbline.

Where does Amos get these notions? We must remember that Old Testament prophecy was not about predictions—even if he were alive today, Amos wouldn't care a fig to predict the future of the housing market or our investments. What Amos will do however by offering the image of the plumbline is remind us of who we truly are. We are, Amos insists, created by God, each of us wholly and completely loved by our Creator. No one, not one at all, not a king, not an elected official nor a successful entrepreneur, is more important to God than even the most humble or impoverished person.

Part of the problem then and now is that we as people lose sight of this gift of God's love. If our starting point is the love of God, then our ethical relationships are founded in Love. As our Presiding Bishop frequently teaches, If it's not about love, it's not about Christ. What's the opposite of being true to the plumbline? We can grow by poor construction into people and communities who believe every person, man, woman, and child, ultimately must see to themselves. Their problems are their problems, our rewards are ours. It's every person for themselves, a claim that's the very opposite of the greatest commandments.

In the time of Amos, Israel had slid into something much like our modern age. Decades without much war and with the rising success of imports and trading had led to great wealth in Israel. Now, Israel should have known what the just thing was to do with that wealth, but as Amos points out, they have neglected God's justice. The rich were ignoring the plight of the poor and the whole community had turned towards acquiring rather than loving. What is God to do? God sends Amos the prophet to remind them of Israel's shared care for one another. Amos warns that there is both a right and wrong way to live. And how does Israel know? By following the plumb line God has set among them.

I know that people have come to talk more and more about their "rights" as if those rights came straight from God's lips to the ears of the world. One woman, in my hearing, said that "They (rights she meant) are right there in the Bible!" I suspect given what she was saying she was thinking of the rights of free market capitalism and not of the plumbline. Yes, Amos might well say, we have God-given rights—the right to be treated fairly, kindly and with justice. All people are one in God and all in God are to care for one another. That's the cry of Amos for God's justice, true three millennia ago, and true today. Amen.