



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

## *The Plumb Line*

Amos 7.7–17; Luke 10.25–37

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This isn't a quiz, but...do you know where in the Bible Amos is located? I think it's fair to say that Amos is sort of hard to find. It's not a long book. Only nine chapters. We don't hear a lot about it. And I will admit that I flipped past it the first time I looked as well. It's easy to do. I'm going to actually invite you to take out either your own Bible or the Bible in the pew in front of you. I don't have the scriptures on the slides today. We're going to go old school. It's towards the end of the Old Testament, among several other pretty short books, other prophets. If you can find Ezekiel, and then Daniel, which both have a little more bulk, it's just a couple past that, right behind Joel.

As you might gather from my sermon title and our children's time discussion, this imagery of the plumb line really hung with me. No pun intended. Okay. That was totally a pun intended. And it was really bad.

The Hebrew word "anak" appears twice here for "plumb line" and "plumb" describing the wall that the Lord is standing near. This Hebrew word appears nowhere else in scripture. In fact, "plumb line" may not even be the best translation for the word—it is similar to an Assyrian word meaning something like "tin." So it could suggest a hunk of metal. But the visual of a measure for straightness still seems to apply, so we're going to go with the language "plumb line."

As biblical books go, this one is pretty old. Amos was a prophet likely during the 8th century BCE, so early to mid 700s, before year zero.

What is a prophet anyway? I think we often think of someone who tells the future, but perhaps more accurately, a prophet is one who tells what they see, the true reality of things, and part of that is being truthful about where things are headed. The prophets in the Bible are sort of the eyes and voice of God, the conduit through which God's message gets to the people. As you might imagine, that message is not always welcomed with open arms.

2 There are two parts to this Amos text for today. The first shorter part, verses 7–9, is a vision that Amos describes of the Lord standing by a perfectly straight wall and holding the plumb line out for Amos to see. Then God indicates that God will set the plumb line in the midst of Israel, quickly determining that Israel is, indeed, not plumb and in need of some serious realignment. As in total destruction. God will not only take down the places of worship that the people have developed but will also take out the king, Jeroboam, and send the entire population into exile.

The second part of this section verses 10–17, is an interesting exchange between Amaziah and Amos. Amaziah, priest of Bethel and collaborator with the king of Israel, Jeroboam. Religion and politics were tied pretty close together. Certainly we can all think of examples of that scenario in the 27 or so centuries since then.

So Amaziah feels it is his duty to let Jeroboam know that Amos is suggesting the downfall of the king, thereby manipulating Amos's prophecy into an act of treason. Then Amaziah turns to Amos and tells him to get the heck out of town, no more prophesying in these parts.

But Amos, firm in his understanding of God's message and committed to his responsibility to convey that message, says no. "I'm not even really a prophet—I'm a herdsman and I trim sycamore trees, but the Lord pulled me out of that and told me this is what I am to do." His call is clear. Amos is not doing this out of his own desire to be a prophet. He is not doing this because he wants to. He's not doing this because he's been trained or taught or shown. But he responds nonetheless. Even when it is unpopular. Even when he's being told to skedaddle because his message is confrontational.

I can't say I blame Amaziah, really. Being told the king is going down and the rest of Israel is going down with him? I mean, what would that have meant for Amaziah? It was probably part of his job description to keep the king in the loop about characters like Amos. And we know that this time of king Jeroboam's reign was a peaceful time for Israel. The

economy is booming. Business is good. Why fix it if it ain't broke?

Not only does Amos suggest things aren't going to go well for the king, Amos has some pretty strong words to say about what is going to happen to Israel's people and Israel's land: destruction, death, exile. Amaziah is really just trying to hold on to what he knows, what is comfortable—which, to be quite frank, may be a fairly normal tendency for most of us.

But I kept going back to that image of the plumb line. What exactly is the plumb line? What is the measurement God is using here that has sent Israel so much out of whack? What have the Israelites done that was so wrong? We have to go back in Amos a bit to get a sense of that. Repeatedly we see words that make it clear Israel has not treated the poor and needy with the care God requires. Chapter 4, verse 1—“Hear this word, you who...oppress the poor, who crush the needy.” Amos is highly critical of those who are taking it easy, the wealthy and those who have set up systems that maintain their own power and security. He does not have good news for them. Chapter 6, verse 4—“Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches”—those will be the first to be exiled, Amos declares. Amos is standing in solidarity with the poor, with the oppressed, with those on the outskirts of society. With God.

Amos several times gives instruction that the people need to “seek the Lord,” repent, draw near to God, reconnect. And through this, they have the opportunity to establish practices of justice and live righteously. But they have not shown that they can do so. Instead, the people are using festivals, offerings, songs for show instead of truly seeking God and living in harmony with God's ways towards others. Some of the most familiar verses from Amos tie these two ideas together:

### **AMOS 5.23–24**

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God says—“Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

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

Warnings have been given—God has already tried to point Israel in a different direction through various means, including disease in crops and gardens, locusts—in chapter 4, verse 6, "cleanness of teeth"—which does not, in fact, mean threat of dental care, but means teeth that are clean because they have not been dirtied with food—"lack of bread," famine. God has sent drought and death. Fire. Lots of fire. But the Israelites haven't gotten the message.

But by the time we get to today's focus, chapter 7, here's where it gets uneasy: Amos's reflection of God is one who has lost patience. Verse 8: "I will never again pass them by." Other translations read: "I will not look the other way any longer," or "I've spared them for the last time. This is it!" There is no more time. There are no more chances. God is done. Judgment is now.

This is not a challenging and then comforting kind of prophecy. This is not a gentle scolding with more or even equal emphasis on the forgiving, gracious nature of God. No, Amos says that God's finished making deals, finished giving warnings. Israel has had its chance time and time again. And, indeed, destruction is what happens over the course of the following years of Israel's history. They are conquered and taken over, the people are exiled and then eventually return back home as strangers in their own land.

Like a wall that is out of plumb, Amos says Israel must be broken down before it can be rebuilt. A wall that is even slightly out of place cannot support that which depends on it above and to its sides. The weight of the entire structure rests on the confidence that all is plumb. But what if it's not?

This should not have been news for Israel. From the get-go, God made it clear that earthly kings were not God's design. All the way back in 1 Samuel, we hear the people calling for power in the way that the other nations have, a human king to help them fit in. And even though God says this is really not

a good idea, the people demanded it anyway, and Saul emerged as the first king. I invite you back to 1 Samuel sometime to read about how that turned out.

Years and years and years of continually building a structure that is out of plumb...leads to the structure no longer being habitable, no longer sound, no longer acceptable. Continual mistreatment of the poor and the needy, the powerless and the downtrodden...perhaps this leads to Israel finding itself beaten and left along the side of the road.

I want to be careful about the theological interpretation that the Old Testament is old news, old laws, and all was put aright with the new covenant in the New Testament. To do so in some ways devalues the truth of the stories as we find them here in the First Testament. The judgment of God as described in Amos and other texts does not necessarily need a later text to fill it out, bring it to completion. God is the same God. However, at the same time, we do find hope, our ultimate hope, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and it is this hope that enables us to truly live in new and full ways. So it's tricky. There's a rub.

But I will say it this way: I think the Luke 10 text gives us a beautiful illustration of the plumb line.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.... Do this, and you will live." Which, I would be remiss from mentioning, is almost exactly quoted by Jesus from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, in the Old Testament.

Do this, and you will live. You will be plumb. Love God and love thy neighbor—as on the words of popular t-shirts and bumper stickers and social media memes: thy black neighbor, thy brown neighbor, thy gay neighbor, thy undocumented neighbor, thy imprisoned neighbor, thy disabled neighbor, thy sick neighbor, thy racist neighbor, thy addicted neighbor, thy Muslim neighbor, thy homeless neighbor, thy beaten-and-left-by-the-side-of-the-road neighbor.

6 Where are you—where are we—out of plumb? This is a question not only of our personal habits and individual actions, but Amos is talking even more pointedly about structural sin, social injustice, massive problems that feel like there is no solution other than to wipe the slate clean. How have we contributed to the continuous building of a structure that is out of plumb? And equally important: What do we do now?

I think sometimes we tend to have a positive view of the word “justice” but a negative view of the word “judgment.” And for me, at least, I think that is heavily due in part to my privilege, my station in life. When I hear “judgment,” I immediately think I’m going to lose something, something is going to be taken away, probably unfairly, but maybe connected with something I’ve done to deserve it. And certainly the judgment that Amos is describing for Israel does not have a positive outcome for Israel.

Yet the flip side of God’s judgment in Amos, for the poor and the needy in this story—what healing, what salvation, what freedom it would hold! God is saying, through Amos, that God is going to turn the world upside-down, taking down Israel and its power and position because Israel did not care for the least, the bottom. That judgment would sure sound good to those at the bottom.

It’s as upside-down as a Samaritan helping out a beaten Jewish man along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho—two men who, at any other time, would have regarded one another as enemies, strangers.

What do these two scripture texts have in common, Amos and Luke? 1—They both share a similar criticism of the assumed political and religious leadership of the day, who are unable and/or unwilling to address the social needs of all the people. 2—These Amos and Luke scriptures share an emphasis on stepping outside comfort zones, not accepting the status quo. It couldn’t have been easy for Amos, as prophet, to say exactly what he full well knew the king and priest did not want to hear, nor could it have been easy for the Samaritan to stop

and help one whom may or may not have returned the favor if the situation were reversed.

These, together, lead to an upside-down understanding of God's kingdom. Not only are individuals personally acting in unexpected and challenging ways, but the entire societal nature is being rocked and rolled.

I had the privilege on Wednesday to join the small group that is meeting every other week to read together and discuss Don Kraybill's *Upside Down Kingdom*. Conversation was good, the snacks were really good, but the opportunity to meet together as an intimate group of less than a dozen was wonderful. Not only did we have the pleasure of getting to know each other personally, but we took the time to wrestle with some difficult ideas—including, I would suggest, although we did not use these words explicitly that evening, how to live out the plumb line. One of the ideas we discussed was that this commitment we make to each other, to God, to justice, to love—this isn't a once-and-done thing. This is a continual, repetitive choice, decision—an in-good-times-and-in-bad sort of activity. This is a covenant we make with God and with one another to live in a community that prioritizes those whom the world does not prioritize, that places power in a different source outside of ourselves, that bends a knee instead of raising a fist, that chooses to live in community even when everything outside these walls seems to scream "every person for themselves."

The other group in which I participated recently was at our denominational Annual Conference in Greensboro, North Carolina. I sat at a table who committed to discussions throughout the week centered on developing a "compelling vision" for life together as the Church of the Brethren during a time—not unlike other times in our history—when many of us have varied understandings of what that looks like and how we should be in the world, different priorities for "church" and probably even different understandings of this plumb line. There were over 100 tables of discussion groups, with eight people per table, and ideas were input into iPads at each table. As the designated note-taker at our table, I can

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say that it was exhausting to listen carefully to what each person had to say about each question, attempt to accurately capture their thought in probably fewer words than they had used to verbally describe it, typing on this flat screen keyboard that didn't always respond the way I wanted to my touch, and then submit it quickly before the next person began to speak.

Meanwhile, at the receiving end of those iPad submissions from all of these tables, a committee was gathering all that data—initially described to us as sitting at the end of a fire hose—quickly scanning responses and compiling a very brief report to share before we moved on to the next question. After each 10- to 20-minute round of discussing a particular question, one of the groups would give us a snapshot of what kinds of things were being shared, sometimes in generalized categories and sometimes specific quotes. One particular quote stood out to me, and I don't remember exactly which question generated the response, but as we considered what the Church of the Brethren should be and do moving forward, one table suggested this: "The church should be worthy of persecution."

"Persecution," according to a quick dictionary definition—to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict; to cause to suffer because of belief.

"Persecution" in this suggestion means that the church is choosing to behave in a way that is so out of alignment with society's values and expected behaviors, that it is treated as odd, weird, even angering those outside.

I'm thinking that's what Amos was talking about. I'm thinking that's what God was looking for Israel to be doing—treating the poor and persons who have been cast-aside with such love and care that society says, questioningly and with a raised eyebrow, "What the heck are you doing?" I'm thinking that's what Jesus is telling the lawyer when he asks who his neighbor is—the person you would least expect, the person you find little commonality with, the person with whom you do not agree—THAT is who we are commanded to love.

One other thing I noticed as I was playing around a bit with the plumb. I watched a few videos online about how to use a plumb bob. In each one, they used the string to either hang on a nail or over a board to gain stability. If I stand here holding the bob just with my hand, it will never stop slightly moving. By the very nature of my humanity—my breath, my trembles, my muscles jerking a teensy bit now and then—I can never actually create a true plumb line. It would require using some type of stable object to gain true plumb. But I noticed in verse 7 that Amos sees God holding the plumb line in God’s hand. I think that is significant. Only through the power of God can true plumb actually be created. We cannot create or live out the plumb line on our own. It is God’s faithfulness to us, and our faith in and dependence on God, that enables us to rebuild our walls when they have been destroyed by our human interests—it is our willingness to allow God’s power working through us that enables us to love our neighbor, to show mercy.

Do this, and you will live.

### **BENEDICTION**

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*(Words attributed to Teresa of Avila)*

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
May it be so.









