

*A Plumb Line*

In our first scripture reading today, the Old Testament prophet Amos reports a vision he had where he saw the Lord standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, and the Lord had a plumb line in his hand. Perhaps not everyone is familiar with what a plumb line is and what it does. A plumb line is one of the world's oldest and simplest tools, and it is still in use today. Basically it is a rope or string with a weight at one end called a plumb bob. Holding one end of the rope and letting the weighted end dangle, gravity will pull the plumb bob straight down allowing you to mark a perfectly perpendicular line.

Having straight vertical lines like that is essential in building walls of any height. The ancient Egyptians used plumb lines to help build the pyramids. They may have been in use even before that. How did the plumb line get its name? Early on the metal lead was used to make the weights on these tools, and the Latin word for lead is "plumbus." That is how the weight became known as a "plumb bob" in English. In a similar way, in English we call a person who fixes pipes a "plumber" because pipes carrying water were originally made of lead. (That's your linguistic trivia for the day.)

Amos' vision symbolically said that the Lord was ready to judge his people Israel. Just as a plumb line would show whether a wall was straight or crooked, the Lord was now ready to say whether Israel was religiously and morally straight or crooked. Here it's helpful to make a distinction between Israel and Judah. Sometimes the terms Israel and Judah are used almost

interchangeably, but in this case there is an important difference. Amos was a citizen of the country Judah, but he was sent to preach in the nation of Israel.

Here's the history and geography relevant to that: Israel was another name for Jacob, the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. Jacob's twelve sons were traditionally considered the founders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. For some time, during the period of the Judges, the Twelve Tribes co-existed more or less independently of one another as a loose confederation of interrelated allies. Under King Saul, the Twelve Tribes consolidated into one nation, and that nation reached its apex under King David and his son King Solomon.

But when Solomon died, the united monarchy disintegrated and split into a Northern Kingdom, called Israel after Jacob, and a Southern Kingdom, called Judah, after one of Jacob's sons. These two kingdoms existed independently for a time, but eventually both fell into the hands of foreign powers. By the time of Jesus, all the people, individually and collectively, who traced their ancestry to Jacob were called both Jews, from the name Judah, and Israelites.

As we said, Amos was from Judah but he was functioning as a prophet of the Lord in Israel. As you might expect, that did not make him particularly popular. Imagine how we would feel if someone from another country came here and criticized us! We would probably not take it too kindly. That's exactly the kind of reception Amos got – pretty hostile. But what was the

message that got him into trouble with the authorities? What was the Lord saying through Amos that upset the establishment so much?

In a nutshell, Amos indicted the rich for taking advantage of the poor. The rich were using unfair business and lending practices, driving those already financially struggling into abject poverty. Although the wealthy usually put on a show of being very religious and pious, they were at heart greedy and corrupt. Couldn't that be ripped from today's headlines! Recently we have heard of the executives of failed companies taking government stimulus money and throwing lavish parties with it or giving themselves huge bonuses. We've read about the Madoff scandal, and we've seen the effects of predatory lending. We're not that different from Israel in Amos' day.

Amos warned Israel that their greed and corruption was eating at the very fiber of their nation and, if they did not repent and make amends, their nation would fall. But they failed to heed Amos' warning and Israel did fall. Are we in danger of falling? In our time we have seen the stock market drop. We have seen seemingly indestructible institutions like the Big Three Automakers and several national banks laid low. What's next? It is sobering for us to consider.

But keep this in mind: Whenever we read prophecy it is important for us to remember that prophecy is not necessarily an unalterable prediction of the future. Prophets speak the Word of the Lord and God always gives us a choice. The doom and gloom the prophets so often speak can be avoided. Judgment can be avoided if the people will only listen and repent. We can follow God and do what he says, and have a better future than what our sin

threatens us with. There is hope. God's plumb line shows us the way, the straight and narrow way, to lead a godly life.

That reminds me of a story a friend of mine, who is a professional dry wall mechanic, told me. He is responsible for installing dry wall in big construction projects. In his work he uses a plumb line. He stands on some scaffolding and drops the plumb line. He has a helper down below who directs him how to move the line over some designated mark, usually saying, "A little to the left" or "A little to the right" until he hits the spot. Then the mechanic marks the line and moves on, repeating the process.

One day my friend had a new helper; it was the helper's very first day on the job. He dropped the first plumb line and immediately the helper said, "Okay," which hardly ever happens on the first try. My friend marked the line, moved down the scaffolding, and dropped the line again. "Okay" the helper called up. My friend thought, "Wow, this is my lucky day." He moved again and then dropped the line the third time, and again the helper said it was right on. Impossible! The next time he dropped the plumb line he watched the helper closely. The helper fielded the plumb bob and then pulled it over the spot, making a crooked line. The helper didn't realize that the plumb line must always stay perfectly straight. You don't change the standard to fit the situation. That makes walls fall down.

It seems to me that often today we want to bend the straight measurement God gives us in Holy Scripture. We want to change God's rules to fit us rather than change ourselves to fit God's law. We come up with all kinds of explanations and excuses as to why we can't do what God commands. Most

insidious in the notion that everything about us is permanently fixed, our lives are predetermined, and we cannot change anything. If that was true why did Amos prophecy to Israel? If that is true why did John the Baptist criticize King Herod? Why would Jesus preach and teach and call us to faith? Surely God would not call us to change unless he had given us the capacity to change, to turn to him and live.

None of us are perfect. We know that. We stand next to God's plumb line and we find that all of us are off the mark, off the straight and narrow. All of us. Thankfully, our salvation is not dependent on how well we measure up to God's standards. Our salvation is secured by Jesus' love for us, made manifest in his death and resurrection. But even though God loves us as we are, he loves us too much to leave us where we are. God's grace is not our license to wallow in sin. We are sons and daughters of the King. God has a better life in store for us and that abundant life begins right now. The Holy Scriptures are our plumb line, they show us the way God wants us to live as his people. We are to be both just and compassionate, and to walk humbly with our God.

Living the Christian life, some call it the pilgrim life, is not easy. It takes courage and tenacity. That's the character Amos showed in the face of his critics. That's what John the Baptist demonstrated even in prison, and it cost him his head. That's how Jesus lived even in the shadow of the cross – bravely and with purpose. And today, thousands upon thousands of Christians still worship and witness despite persecution and torture. We too can be valiant; we can be true; we can be brave. By God's grace we can follow Christ wherever he leads and be witnesses to His Word. Amen.